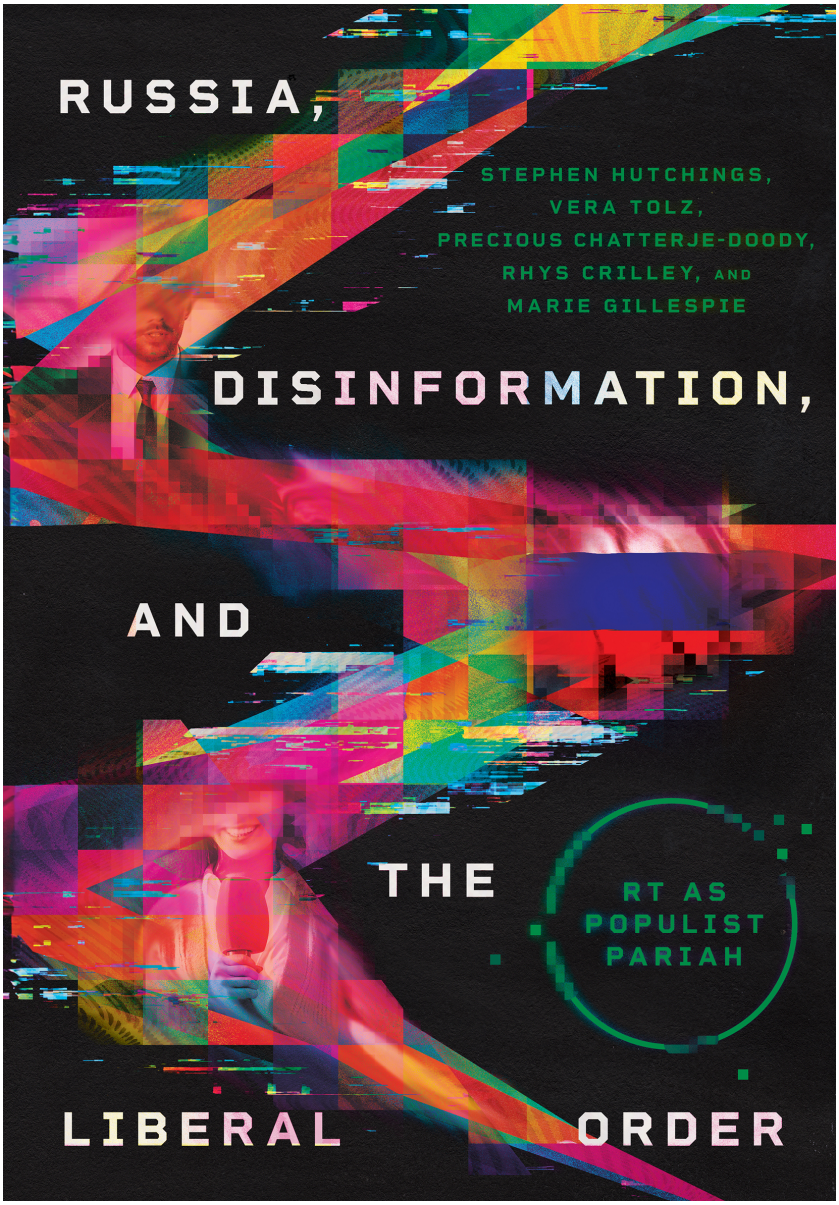
RUSSIA,
STEPHEN HUTCHINGS,
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MARIE GILLESPIE
DISINFORMATION,
AND
THE
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RUSSIA, DISINFORMATION, AND THE LIBERAL ORDER

RT as Populist Pariah

Stephen Hutchings, Vera Tolz, Precious Chatterje-Doody, Rhys Crilley, Marie Gillespie

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Chapter 5, to a significant extent, is based on an article by Tolz, Hutchings, Chatterje-Doody, and Crilley (2021), "Mediatization and Journalistic Agency: Russian Television Coverage of the Skripal Poisonings." We thank the publisher, Sage, for permission to reuse the research in this monograph.

Anyone who has conducted in-depth audience research over a lengthy period of time will know how arduous it can be and how good collaborations that unite the right researchers (academic and nonacademic) with the correct skill sets are essential. This is certainly true for our audience research on RT.

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While we acknowledge and thank our contributors, the analyses and final chapters presented here, as well as any failings, remain our own.

Note on Transliteration

The transliteration of Russian names and words follows the Library of Congress system, without the use of diacritics and two-letter tie characters. We have made exceptions where a word or name is commonly known in another form (e.g., "Yeltsin" rather than "El'tsin"). In our own text, we transliterate Ukrainian place-names (including those under Russian occupation) from Ukrainian. However, in quotes from Russian sources Russian transcriptions of the names of Ukrainian cities are reproduced in order to reflect the original. Where acronyms are used, these reflect the English-language name for the organization or term in question.

INTRODUCTION

In the West the Russian state under Vladimir Putin has become inextricably associated with "disinformation." The term is usually defined as the *deliberate* and malicious falsification of facts and evidence by hostile (foreign) actors and is differentiated from "misinformation," which is seen as the *inadvertent* distribution of falsehoods. While accepting this basic distinction, our book necessarily engages with the complexities, overlaps, interplays, contradictions, and inconsistencies afflicting the terminological quagmire that has accumulated around varieties of truth distortion. A common problem is that strict adherence to the definition of "disinformation" given above absolves RT (and other Russian state actors) of much of the culpability it merits; prior to 2022, outright falsifications, while occasionally present in RT's content, did not predominate. This issue in turn leads to polemical and sometimes unhelpful expansions of the concept of disinformation to include adjacent activities less easily associated with straightforward lies and deceit. A related challenge is that of where to locate the deceit in question. Content that is factually correct may be misleadingly framed or contextualized. Outrageously one-sided, distorted accounts may be excused as opinion or editorializing. A largely accurate and balanced report may be part of a wider obfuscating strategy to deceive audiences into trusting an outlet that in fact ultimately serves the interests of a malign actor.

Above all, the notion of a discrete realm of neutral facts that news sources either present correctly and objectively or subjectively manipulate, reframe, and distort runs counter to journalistic practices widespread across democratic environments, from Fox News and the *Daily Mail* to the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*. Ultimately, such conceptions rest on long since discredited positivist paradigms positing that the discourses and narratives through which reality is understood and represented can easily be disentangled from pristine reality itself.

To acknowledge that truth is contested in, and shaped by, human discourse is not to

reject the value itself, however, just as framing and contextualizing empirical facts do not altogether erase them (Strassheim 2022). We refute relativist principles equating Russian state narratives with those of news outlets following mainstream journalistic standards. While disinformation, misinformation, hyperpartisan reporting, conspiracy theories, and extremist narratives can be found in all media environments, including those of democratic states, and while authoritarian state actors are capable of relaying news in a nonpartisan, balanced manner, even allowing a modicum of political debate, the difference between the two contexts is qualitative, not merely one of degree. For authoritarian communication activities, we adopt the term "state propaganda," first theorized a hundred years ago as state actors' repetition of ideas to mobilize public opinion toward desired ends (Laswell [1927] 1938, 11–12, 14). Propaganda is "the war of ideas on ideas" (Laswell [1927] 1938, 14). Unlike in democracies, where divergent ideological perspectives and interests compete within and across media sources with relative freedom, in authoritarian states, news is systematically framed and contextualized to support state-aligned actors' politicized messaging designed to consolidate, defend, and extend state interests. This is most evident with state-media campaigns launched in relation to specific events or issues but also applies at other times. Such campaigns often include disinformation in its limited sense, but they are not reducible to it. In Oates's (2016, 2021) accounts of what she calls "rewired propaganda," Soviet-era persuasion techniques are combined with digitization and populist political communication, but varieties of contemporary propaganda extend beyond this combination and beyond the Russian context. Nor can state propaganda, let alone blatant disinformation, be relied upon to resonate with its target audiences unless it is embedded in the societal narratives and values specific to the audiences it targets. Where international broadcasters like RT are concerned, those narratives and values were mostly forged in nonauthoritarian conditions. This is one of several reasons why RT so vividly highlights the tensions pervading disinformation studies. We refer to disinformation less as a neutral category of analysis than as part of the shifting, three-way dynamic (Russia-disinformation-the liberal order) we will illuminate with close scrutiny of RT.

The idea of "the liberal order" likewise requires clarification. For some the term describes the international rule system championed by Western democracies (Ikenberry and Deudney 1999) and regularly flouted by renegades like Putin as part of a geopolitical realignment. In this account an authoritarian alliance strives to overturn a unipolar world whose defining principles are portrayed as cover for American hegemony. For many of its enthusiasts, the term designates the empirical reality of an aggregation of (liberal) democratic states that coenforce international institutions enjoying global currency. In other articulations its force is ideological: "First and foremost, the liberal world order is an *ideological* order, based on liberal ideas and values that include open and free trade, liberal democratic governance, universal human rights … international institutions, and the rule of law" (Taylor 2020).

Interestingly, the earlier sense of a liberal order in crisis, shared by both sympathizers and antagonists like Putin (Ikenberry 2018; Gibson 2021), has, since Russia invaded Ukraine, given way in the West to more confident reassertions of its durability. Also significant is the fact that such invocations expand the term's semantic field to cover not only a rules-based international system but also the democratic states that established it, along with the liberalism that such states claim, often misleadingly, to embody. Ikenberry and Deudney (1999) openly associate the liberal order with US free-market capitalism,

defining the order's core principle, "structural liberalism," in terms of "the peculiarly penetrated and reciprocal nature of American hegemony; the role of capitalism in overcoming the problem of relative gains; and the distinctive civic political identity that pervades [liberal] societies." Like many who conflate democracy with liberal democracy, Ikenberry overlooks tensions between democratic principles concerned with enabling lowly populaces to constrain the power of the privileged and liberalism whose multiple strands include deference to the expertise of scientific elites and to the freedom of individuals to accumulate wealth. This renders the term "liberal democracy" problematic, and populist disrupters and their authoritarian enablers capitalize on this. In this book we prefer "democracies" and "authoritarian states" when referring to geopolitical reality, reserving "liberal democracy" for its occurrence in public discourse. Significantly, the more expansive definitions now accorded to "the liberal order" gloss over these tensions and contrast sharply with an equally oversimplified "authoritarian order" for which Putin's Russia is seen as the figurehead. Thus, Way (2022) claims that Russia's "assault on the liberal order" has "the potential to weaken the authoritarian international." He invites readers to contemplate "the rebirth of the liberal order," gathering under one umbrella the world's democrats, liberalism, the international liberal order, the liberal world, the West, the community of democratic states, and the global liberal project.

The relational and identity-oriented aspects of Way's account of the liberal order foreground the process by which it is cocreated together with its nemesis. Putin, for his part, routinely derides what he sees as the West's liberal degeneracy. This cocreation process —aided by populism's role as mediator between its extremes—is key to our concerns. Thus, by the liberal order we mean not an objectively existing reality but a key ideational component in a dynamic with real-world consequences for democratic and authoritarian states and for their modes of engagement.

Our book is based on research carried out by a multidisciplinary team of scholars within the framework of a large three-year grant awarded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council. We use RT—its outputs, audiences, and practices—as a prism through which to view (1) the wider activities of the Russian state in the information sphere; (2) the relationship between the Western liberal order and a Russia of enduring pariah status (whose conferral by the West is precisely why it does not hold beyond the West's borders or, indeed, beyond liberal democratic media space within those borders and why RT is thus able to exploit it for its own populist branding purposes); (3) populism and disinformation, which are not limited to the Russian context but are, especially via RT, linked to Russia's perceived threat to that order.

The overarching question we pose is "What *is* RT?" In answering it we must account for the relational processes at whose center we locate RT. What it is becomes a function of how we come to understand, or know, its place in this dynamic. Epistemology doubles as ontology. We also examine how Russia presents itself on the international stage; autocratic approaches to information management in a multiactor digital environment; the relationship between this environment and the widening fault lines within the Western democratic establishment; the nature of populist insurgencies against it, including their assault on liberal principles like impartiality and respect for empirical truth; the modes in which Russian state and substate actors engage with such insurgencies; and Russia's place within the populist pantheon. Post-2022 restrictions placed on RT across Europe and North America add further complexity to our project because we must define what RT *was*

(prior to 2022) while recalibrating our approach to determining what it *remains* (the channel is adept at reinvention).

Our book is the first substantive account of RT. One reason for this is the novelty of exploring such large-scale issues through the lens of a single broadcasting organization of dubious journalistic standards and modest ratings. We chose this approach not just because it allows us to explore the general through the specific (the case study rationale) but also because it is in the practices of RT and its audiences that the issues intersect (the nodal point rationale). Another reason resides in the controversy overhanging RT. Scandals constitute a legitimate object of study for the humanities and social sciences (Tumber and Waisbord 2019; Thompson 2013; Johnson 2017; Johnson, Basham, and Thomas 2022). Our book is as much about those scandalized by RT as it is about RT as the scandalizing party. It is the story of the seemingly paradoxical international cocreation of a populist pariah. This does not mean that notions of an autocratic Russian state that threatens democracy through information manipulation are illusory. It merely implies that the story that defines Russia by its tendency to target a vulnerable liberal order with coordinated disinformation campaigns is more applicable in certain contexts than in others. As our discussion of the liberal order indicates, this story is generated discursively as well as through empirical facts.

Two Cautionary Tales, or Reasons to Be Fearful, Part I

Shortly before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, a fellow academic from a different field reacted with surprise to casual mention of the book's subject: "If it were my book, I would be scared, but perhaps I am biased!" Her reaction exemplified the aversion generated by the very word "Russia" in the context of the Putin regime's state-sponsored poisonings, electoral interference, cyberhacking, and disinformation. Since then, Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine—and the subsequent banishment of RT from Western media space—seems to render her caution and "perhaps I am biased" as anachronistic and misguided. Yet this intuitive willingness to question the collective wisdom reflected in her beliefs is a core liberal principle that we abandon at our peril.

As human beings we share the values of democracy and liberalism that have shaped Western responses to recent Russian actions since 2014 (the year of Crimea's annexation). As scholars we caution against reading backward from the immorality of Russia's war to suggest a retrospective teleology whereby Putin was destined to act as he did because such behavior is integral to his regime. This blinds us to the messy contingencies that beset autocratic and democratic states alike, impeding our judgment regarding the long-term measures required to preempt future aggression.

Russia's autocratic state has consistently shown itself willing to deploy the latest technologies to achieve multiple goals. This willingness culminated in its effort to subjugate Ukraine in 2022. Our research on one of the purported lynchpins of its disruptive endeavors indicates that well before February 2022 much discourse about Russia had misconceived the nature of the threat. If a problem is to be confronted, it must be properly understood.

We have previously incurred the wrath of the Russian state's online acolytes, so though

overstated, our fellow scholar's concern was not unjustified. She was, however, intimating that received wisdom concerning Russian intentions toward those, including academics like us, who work within the liberal framework denigrated by Putin might reflect bias (Barber, Foy, and Barker 2019). There is a related paradox in the fact that even democracy's most outspoken advocates sometimes abandon the liberal attachment to dispassionate analysis where Russian malfeasance is concerned.[1] Since 2022 this tendency, which exposes another dimension to the tension between liberalism and democracy, has threatened to mutate into a maxim.

Unsurprisingly, concerns about Russia's threat to a liberal order in which the unity of democracy and liberalism is, unhelpfully, taken as read were mounting well before 2022. They appeared to culminate in the plausible notion that the elected US president—the figurehead of that order—was either the willing beneficiary of Putin's efforts to reshape democracy to his own ends or his stooge. Government-sponsored reports on suspected Russian interference in the US and UK democracies concluded that the 2016 US presidential election was targeted extensively. But because evidence of a similar disruption to the Brexit referendum vote was never sought—itself a cause for concern—such interference could not be confirmed (Mueller 2019; Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2020). These divergent findings cannot mask the consensus that Russia seeks consistently to subvert Western societies. Its decision to progress from covert subversion to brutal aggression against one of democracy's newest converts has only solidified this consensus.

Here, a second anecdote comes into play. In July 2021 the *Guardian* website briefly led with an exclusive report about leaked Kremlin documents that apparently confirmed a coordinated Russian state campaign to install its favored candidate in the White House (Harding, Borger, and Sabbagh 2021). The leaked papers referred to the vulnerability of US "media space." A day later, under scrutiny from Twitterati of various political leanings, it emerged that the language used in the original Russian documents was curiously unidiomatic, prompting suspicions regarding the leak's authenticity (Porter 2021). Although none of the respectable figures raising questions were sufficiently confident to dismiss the report, it rapidly disappeared from the *Guardian* website. Ironically, similar attention to linguistic infelicities—including the telltale errors of article use typical of Russian learners of English—is often used to unmask the identities of trolls operating in the very US media space referenced in the leaked documents.

The *Guardian* story performs valuable work. Part of the related tale we tell is about how RT has exploited the media space to which the story points. Yet another subplot highlights the compulsive tendency within Western public discourse to identify the Kremlin's hand in all manner of hostile acts, regardless of the evidence trail. Finally, the deployment of identical linguistic detective work to opposite effect exemplifies a complex mirroring central to our account of how Russian actions and our responses to them are mutually shaped.

If the tensions within the liberal order's relationship with Russia are one of the overarching themes that closer scrutiny of RT reveals, another is that relationship's reciprocal nature. It took Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the most troubling illustrations of this reciprocity to emerge. Following the invasion, certain German regions prohibited the infamous *Z* sign used to symbolize Russian prowar patriotism. Display of the sign in these regions became punishable by imprisonment (Moody 2022). The German legislation

followed pressure from Ukrainian politicians, whose calls for such action embodied an unanswerable moral truth. Key to Russia's own justification for its aggression, however, was its commitment to "denazifying" Ukraine—a slogan designed to evoke memories of the Soviet Union's heroic World War II victory. Kremlin propagandists portrayed the German ban as evidence of Hitler's residual European influence. Europe's long shared history with Russia, and the deeply intertwined narratives that define their identities, renders simple civilized (democratic), self/barbaric (authoritarian and imperialist), and Other models problematic when we strive to progress from moral condemnation to explanation and understanding.

The American vulnerability noted in the leaked documents is more than a Kremlin hunch. We now recognize that rather than the singular product of Russia's most audacious influence operation, the Donald Trump phenomenon reflected fractures within America, along with a right-wing disinformation ecosystem whose roots extend back to the 1980s (Benkler, Farris, and Roberts 2020). If these belated revelations showed Russia's place within the forces menacing the liberal order to be less central, they hardly erased it. The same is true of the rise of China, which even after the invasion of Ukraine is displacing Russia from the summit of the challenges it poses, not least because its global strategies align with those of its powerful neighbor, from which it borrows well-honed influencing techniques.[2] Of similarly meager comfort is the fact that Putin's Russia represents a new type of autocratic regime capable of exploiting populist insurgencies against Western establishments. More broadly, it is easier to project socioeconomic reasons for domestic revolts onto external enemies than to deal with them internally.

Russia-related anxieties have reached a fever pitch for many reasons. Russia is a nuclear power whose shadow extends across Eastern Europe; in 2022 it launched the biggest and arguably the first post–World War II full-scale war on European territory. Its current leader is an ex-KGB spy with an acknowledged nostalgia for Soviet might. As Malia (2000) demonstrated, the Cold War initiated a mutual othering process between "Russia" (as a shortcut for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR]) and the "West" of a previously unprecedented intensity, though this intensity has arguably been surpassed in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Malia correctly notes that at the earlier point of his writing, the process was historically unusual. Importantly, he also acknowledges that Europe and "the West are not one and the same"—an omission on the part of Neumann 2016, who likewise identifies the mutual othering phenomenon. The fact that much of Russia itself falls within the borders of that continent, that prior to and indeed beyond the nineteenth century it developed within the European cultural framework, and that its European identity was rarely questioned until 1917) has lent an incestuous complexity to an othering process reinforced by the failure of Russia's anticipated sameness to materialize throughout the twentieth century and beyond (Malia 2000). Marxist ideas about a Communist society could not have inspired the creation of the USSR without Russia's idealized reading of Western thought. This fact prompts latter-day Russian nationalist extremists to experience a similar antipathy toward the intellectual basis of one of the twentieth century's great totalitarian tyrannies—Marxism-Leninism—as that felt by democrats (on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine, Putin blamed Lenin for according Russia's neighbor the statehood he so resented).

Fears of outright Russian aggression against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization have, since 2022, reached heights not experienced since the Cold War. Well before then,

however, the military lexicon was dominating Western discourse about Russia through notions of "hybrid warfare" and the "information war." A Google search based on the terms "weaponizing" and "Russia" conducted six months before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine produced over 177,000 results indicating that, according to the Anglophone press, the Kremlin had been busy weaponizing corruption, gas, wheat, the actor Charlie Sheen, the COVID-19 pandemic, outer space, the moon, money, dolphins, whales, cockroaches, the weather, disability, history, national trauma, its own population, pop stars, sports, migrants, tedium, sexuality, postmodernism, and Russia's own COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V. In 2022 the list ballooned to include prisoners-of-war and memories of victory over Adolf Hitler, ensuring a blurring of lines between military aggression proper and warlike behavior.

The fact that the term "weaponizing" is used both figuratively and literally illustrates how concerns about Russia's intentions have entered public consciousness as one of the "metaphors we live by" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). It reconfirms Russia's role as the West's constitutive Other, helping to explain why those who see themselves as bastions of our liberal order, including mainstream politicians and journalists, quite uniformly denounce Russia. A more conciliatory line toward the Kremlin had been left to a handful of centrists but is now—following the invasion of Ukraine—almost the exclusive preserve of the far right and far left.

Reasons to Be Fearful, Part 2

Russia's anti-Western armory contains a wide variety of tools. Most are connected to its propaganda machine and to its enactment of what is known as posttruth politics. This has become particularly evident since 2013 through Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin's effort to sabotage the US presidency, the 2018 Salisbury poisonings, and collusion with Bashar al-Assad's Syrian dictatorship, not to mention assassinations of domestic critics. In all these cases, the Kremlin disinformation machine swamped the news environment with fantastical narratives aimed at diverting attention from Russian culpability: attributing war crimes in Bucha to Ukrainian "Nazis," the nerve agent poisoning of Sergei Skripal to British secret services, and the Assad regime's chemical attacks on its own population to the humanitarian White Helmets.

It was not just the trauma of the US 2020 election that prompted a modification of concerns about Russian misdeeds in the information environment, however. In the same year, the COVID-19 pandemic spawned an "infodemic" of conspiracy theories and fake remedies. Russian state actors, including RT Spanish and RT German, have been implicated in this phenomenon (Rankin 2020), which did not originate in Russia. Russian broadcasters occasionally promoted COVID-19 conspiracy theories and more often the antilockdown rhetoric that Western libertarian circles used to resist state-imposed restrictions (Hall 2020). Now, though, the fear of Russia's willingness to exploit such rhetoric is tempered by the knowledge that its causes belong elsewhere.

COVID-19 highlighted a problem that exceeds the context of the disease: a panic-induced, indiscriminate proliferation of terminology aimed at capturing the disinformation threat generated by the virus itself. The status of conspiracy theories about COVID-19's

origins is indicative. Suspicions that COVID-19 began in a laboratory initially shuttled between the United States and China as one accused the other of unwittingly (or deliberately) unleashing the virus. Such suspicions first attracted mutual allegations of conspiracy mongering until they received a legitimizing endorsement from the World Health Organization and subsequently returned to the realm of the implausible and paranoid before being resurrected by a US intelligence reinvestigation of the lab leak hypothesis (Kessler 2021).

The inconvenient truth is that conspiracy theories not only can ring true, as with mainstream media (MSM) speculation around Trump's purported collusion with Putin, but, occasionally, prove to be true—a fact often cited as evidence to support new conspiracy narratives. Even when patently untrue, they gain the sincere, if misguided, support of the groups disseminating them. This ought to differentiate them from the propagation of unambiguously false information whether inadvertent (misinformation) or deliberate (disinformation). Instead, the words become tangled in a jumble that also includes "propaganda" (politically tendentious narratives), "malinformation" (information that, though possibly true, is deeply damaging), and the now discredited "fake news" (a rhetorical weapon popularized by the forty-fifth US president to dismiss unfavorable stories). Russia's invasion of Ukraine, accompanied by its deliberate information manipulation, has failed to prompt its opponents to reflect on how apparently fantastical conspiracy theories about covert US involvement in Ukraine might ring true for Arabic and Spanish speakers in the Middle East and Latin America attuned to postcolonial paradigms (Myers and Frenkel 2022).

The spread of the terminological mélange—and of its underlying pathologies—can create imprecise equivalencies. The *Guardian* euphemistically described Russia's propaganda blitzkrieg as "a soft power onslaught" but condemned one of Russia's few genuine soft power projects—its Sputnik V vaccine—as "weaponization" (Johnston and Plunkett 2014; Henley 2021).

The Death of the Nation?

The confusion partly reflects the ideological reconfigurations that followed the collapse of communism. With no potent Marxist ideology to confront, democracies adopted less delineated forms of persuasion and public diplomacy than those deployed by Cold Warriors of truth like Radio Liberty. The simultaneous triumph of democratic values and market economics, however, conferred upon them a universality that, with the acceleration of globalization, makes them harder to associate with the individual states that epitomize them. It is no accident that Russian broadcasters like RT embrace libertarian right critiques of the countries hosting their target audiences. Nor is it coincidental that Russian actors have benefited from technological giants like Facebook and from the liberation of finance flows (e.g., London's role as the preferred site for Russian money laundering).

Assertions that neoliberal economics and democracy do not mesh are a cliché. Paradoxically, it was this realization—encapsulated in the acerbic 1990s Russian pun *der'mokratiia* (shitocracy)—that laid the ground for the replacement of Yeltsin, an enthusiast of Russian-US cooperation, with Putin, whose less benign view of America

contributed to his growing use of the disjuncture to his own nefarious ends. As the Chinese and Russian cases illustrate, the prevalence of neoliberal models, combined with their decoupling from democratic governance and from coherent belief systems more generally, has spawned new forms of authoritarian nationalism more virulent yet less tangible than their predecessors.

Contemporary nationalism's relationship with globalization is contradictory. Globalization is associated with both the decline of the nation-state and, via the reaction against its suppression of local identities, the revitalization of nationalism, which has both incorporated worldwide intellectual and affective trends, such as antimigrant sentiments and the rebirth of so-called traditional values, and exploited nativist resentment against the perceived influence of global elites. Since the early 1990s, globalization has reflected the influence of digital technologies whose transformation of the information landscape furnishes nation-state actors with unprecedented opportunities. Yet that same transformation poses security risks, ranging from cybercrime to false narrative infodemics, whether disseminated across grassroots digital networks or via hostile state actors fomenting military conflict (including RT).

The infodemic associated with COVID-19 is not merely the function of scientific advances (a technologically determinist assumption). As Davies (2018a) shows, it is linked to a more enduring erosion of the post-Enlightenment settlement, a process that fostered declining faith in expertise; a rebellion against the tyranny of empirical data; a loss of trust in institutions (including academia and the traditional press) and in rational logic; and a corresponding valorization of populist sentiment. Davies (2020) avoids the term "posttruth," arguing that its connotations of free-for-all relativism obscure the advent of an entire "new truth regime" in which the "authenticity of the lying demagogue" able to "call bullshit" on the establishment is preferred over the dubious ratiocinations of an out-of-touch elite. State-sponsored organizations like RT readily bathe in this ocean of populist affect, but nation-states can be buffeted by, as well as surf, its towering waves.

Truth and the Otherness of Selfhood

RT serves less as an exemplar of worldwide trends than as the prism through which Russia's engagement with them is refracted. More than merely harnessing the populist insurgency to a Kremlin script, RT performs the principles animating that insurgency. One of our themes is RT's willing embrace of its own notoriety as a badge of honor, enabling it to infiltrate the derided populaces whose causes it promotes against sneering elites.

Certain risks are associated with linking RT, particularly its international (English-language) and French services, to Kremlin-sponsored cyberhackers and trolls. The fact that it adopted more subtle dissimulation strategies than such actors, even in the context of the Ukraine war, leads to another layer of self-deception.[3] If Russia provides the West's constitutive Other, then how much more tension arose from the fact that Russia's primary representative within the global media sphere was, until it was ejected, an imposter internal to the Western *self*? RT was, after all, an international broadcaster that hid its state sponsorship beneath its acronymic title while masquerading as a US-style alternative media (alt-media) upstart, intoning the online jargon of the Anglophone citizen activist, and even

welcoming onto its payroll figures Western viewers are used to seeing on-screen in their living rooms: José Mourinho, William Shatner, Larry King, and others. It is the outrage perpetrated in this brazen act of impersonating the self that renders RT so Other; no wonder, then, that it was so forcefully disgorged in 2022. There is nothing contradictory in this apparent paradox. Complete otherness is of no value in self-identity construction; it is the history of close engagement between Islam and Christianity that facilitates the status of Muslims as Europe's primary "oriental Other" (Triandafyllidou 1998). The same approach has been applied to Russia's status vis-à-vis the West (Groys 1992).

RT is nonetheless acutely important to the Kremlin—hence the postinvasion status of Margarita Simonyan, RT's editor in chief, as domestic propagandist in chief. There is no disputing the Kremlin's hostility to democracy and scant regard for the post-Enlightenment principles that developed in tandem with the liberalism commonly (if not always accurately) associated with democracy, including those of balance and the pursuit of truth. Its disregard for recognized journalistic ethics standards saturates the practices of its primary tool of international projection. Our departure point, however, was a growing frustration that many existing accounts of what RT asserts is Russia's stance toward democracy are either reductive or misleading. They fail to identify the true challenge presented by Putin's Russia, along with key features of the media landscape in which RT operated before 2022 and, crucially, whose margins it still inhabits beyond the West. They exhibit blind spots with respect to the workings of the Russian state and to the current condition in which democracy and the liberal order find themselves.

Equally critical is the fact that many of the failures reflect the influence of enduring identity postures, the indiscriminate profusion of terminology surrounding the Kremlin's misuse of information being but one. They reveal as much about the West as about its nonoriental eastern Other and more still about the dynamic that locks them in a powerful embrace as unwelcome as it is irresistible. It is symbolic that many perceive the English term "disinformation" to derive from a word (*dezinformatsiya*) developed by the Soviet Union to resemble a Russified version of a concept that originated in French (Bittman 1985).[4]

Our skepticism about dominant Western narratives concerning Russia's actions in the global information environment is motivated by awareness that truth is messy, multifaceted, open-ended, and complex. This messiness only increases the need for precision. Far from providing ammunition to enemies of the truth like Putin, complexity and nuance are its loyal accomplices. They should not be mistaken for an apologia or whataboutism.

In this context we reject widespread objections to the very idea of juxtaposing RT's dubious, deceptive practices with the output of the BBC World Service (WS), with its global reputation for impartial public service. The truth that such reactions ignore is not so much that to compare is not to assert equivalence, nor that the BBC WS receives funding from Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but that without such comparisons the radical *differences* distinguishing the BBC from RT elude the grasp of reason. Consigning it to an otherness so abhorrent that it cannot tolerate comparison is tantamount to mystification. It is *this* that lets RT off the hook, not the beam of rational analysis.

Comparison involves similarity as well as difference; the BBC WS and RT are both multiplatform broadcasters competing for some of the same audiences (RT still broadcasts in the Middle East and Latin America while expanding its broadcasting in Africa and the

Indian subcontinent), each benefiting differently from state support rapid advances in digital technology, the democratization of mass communication tools, and the march of global market forces.[5] Without this basis for comparison, we cannot pinpoint why the BBC WS surpasses its authoritarian rivals, ethically and practically.

We should likewise avoid treating RT as something so alien that it evades responsibility for explaining its practices (one reason why the United Kingdom's media regulator, Ofcom [2019], was more effective than the politicians who called for RT to be silenced was that until it revoked RT's license, it did not allow it this luxury when investigating impartiality breaches). Unless we scrutinize RT's account of itself impartially, we cannot properly measure it against our standards of veracity and propriety. Our research included interviews with RT staff, present and past, and with members of its audience, sympathetic and critical. Qualitative research combining emic and etic approaches allows researchers to understand different cultural mindsets, including whatever fallacies or bad faith they entail, by putting aside one's own beliefs and inhabiting those mindsets from within (emic) and then subjecting them to perspectives created by the observer and involving academic concepts and theory (etic). RT is as good, or bad, as the executives, presenters, and followers who constitute it. In categorizing them as misguided dupes or imperialist foot soldiers, we must first accord them the status of being human, with all the moral ambiguity that this entails.

Epistemology as Ontology

The value of comparison and insider views would diminish if RT consistently conformed to the uncomplicated image propagated in Western public discourse: that of a mere weapon in a hybrid warfare stockpile. It is RT's tendency to elude the constraints that such convenient templates impose on it that makes them so ill-suited to exposing the challenge it still poses to the liberal order. The closer we scrutinize RT, the more intriguing the contradictions it generates and the more important it becomes to resolve them.

RT is both a tool of Russian state messaging and a (selective) aggregator of world news sources, many gathered from the respectable mainstream press (the latter function has outlasted RT's post-2022 ejection from Western media space). Answering to leading Russian media executives, it employs an overwhelmingly non-Russian reporter workforce whose motivations range from genuine (if misguided) support for Kremlin positions, through endorsement of the broadcaster's anti-Western agenda or the desire for a personal political platform, to an opportunistic desire to earn money or gain a foothold on the journalistic career ladder (despite the suspicion tarnishing ex-RT employees). RT's output has sometimes resembled that of a traditional instrument of soft power, but it increasingly adopts the poses of an aggressive alt-media upstart waging war on MSM hegemony. It is known primarily as a television channel, yet its biggest audiences have always been online.

RT is a multilingual news provider with services in English, Russian, French, German, Spanish, and Arabic, each of which functions in political and media contexts requiring divergent strategies that resist central coordination; since the various postinvasion bans, concern about RT's importance as a disseminator of Kremlin war narratives to non-Western audiences, especially Latin American Spanish speakers, remains strong (see, for

example, US Department of State 2022). It adopts reassuringly familiar media genres, presenting styles, studio sets, and program formats incongruous with their propagandistic content. The cognitive dissonance, however, is sometimes attributable to RT's canny appreciation of the potential that digital platforms offer and of the participatory practices and informal address modes they foster, including new forms of humor.

To extend the conundrums to RT's relationship with its operating environment, it captures the essence of this environment while remaining a peripheral, ineffectual player within it (at least, in terms of conventional metrics). Its underwhelming performance accounts for the contempt directed against it, even as it functions as a lightning rod for Western anxieties concerning its sponsor's nefarious intentions. Until its effective expulsion from the Western mediasphere in 2022, the more it moderated its behavior in response to the hostility it elicited, camouflaging itself as a bona fide news source, the more disgusted mainstream Western politicians grew with its machinations. Yet when its mask slipped and breached their hallowed journalistic standards, they became even more outraged. Conversely, RT has reveled in the scandal it generates while striving to be taken seriously, an aspiration now only achievable beyond Western media space.

Methods and Multiplicity

Discourses exhibit greater or lesser plausibility, establishing distant or close relationships with empirical facts. Just as allowing for a multiplicity of discourses or studying a plurality of broadcasters does not mean equating them all, those who research scandals are not obliged to treat them identically. In some instances, the offended party is justifiably scandalized. Importantly, it is through comparison that one is particularly able to see what is specific and different.

We fully embrace the notion of truth. As in the BBC's (n.d.) account of *due* impartiality, that truth may be elusive, residing between competing, partial accounts of it but no less real for that. The BBC recognizes that its duty to reflect multiple viewpoints on news events and issues is not a mandate to accord them equivalent weight but a corollary of its mission to analyze, explain, and educate its audiences as well as to inform and entertain them. As scholars who seek to explain and interpret the RT phenomenon, we are likewise committed to considering, comparing, and contrasting the perspectives and motivations of RT's staff, audiences, and harshest critics. Such a comprehensive approach constitutes a necessary first step toward understanding what RT *is*, without which it would be impossible to confront it effectively.

Methodological agility is key. Our authorial team reflects a complementary range of expertise from modern languages, history, international relations, media anthropology, and cultural studies. Some of our research drew on quantitative data to make sense of the scope of RT's content, the profile of its audiences, and the audiences' modes of engagement. We are as equally aware of the positivist pitfalls of quantitative methods as of the subjectivist limitations of the qualitative techniques applied to individual RT programs, editorials, and social media posts.

Without an implicit element of counting, qualitative methods struggle to generate generalizations, just as quantitative data cannot yield meaning unless researchers exercise

personal judgment in interpreting them (Flood et al. 2012, 256–61). There is complementarity within and across both aspects. The quantitative dimension includes manual content analysis as well as computational data analysis and social network analysis techniques. The qualitative research juxtaposes and corroborates emic perspectives based on interviews with etic viewpoints reliant on close readings of texts (including those on social media). It is informed both by historically grounded empirical observation and by a Bakhtinian approach to discourse that emphasizes the multilayered inflection of the voice of the self with that of the Other.

Our multifaceted object of study requires a multiauthor approach unusual in the humanities and social sciences. Each chapter was coauthored by two to three scholars, read carefully by the whole team, and edited by other team members in an iterative process overseen by the two main authors.

The Limitations of the Information War Model

The plan was modified as new angles on our subject emerged from each newly drafted chapter. The process was dynamic, ensuring that primary contentions were forged through interauthorial and cross-disciplinary debate but shaped by theoretical assumptions that provided a common framework. Our shared frustrations with existing accounts of Russia's communications environment relate to an information war narrative that exaggerates the Russian state's capacity to harness a digital information environment defined by transnational digital flows and complex intersections and that fails to recognize that (1) Russia's actions are both reshaped and constrained by this environment, and (2) all wars involve multiple parties. Our own counternarrative captures the contingencies and contradictions in Russian state strategy, the multidirectional dynamic by which conflict in a reconfigured information sphere occurs, and the new digital processes that traverse it.

The manifold problems with the current consensus, as chapter 1 will show, relate to its acceptance of a military *transmission model* inadequate to the conditions of a hypernetworked world where media logics intersect with and reshape political imperatives, where audiences are active producers, not vulnerable receivers, and where disinformation is deployed against a liberal order while also emerging from its core to form a global ecosystem incorporating state, nonstate, domestic, and foreign actors. We acknowledge the threat posed by Russia's role within that ecosystem, arguing that to understand it, transmission models should be tempered with insights into the difficulties of influencing international audiences and the interconnectedness of media, technology, politics, and public opinion.

Concerns over Russia's unilinear assault on the liberal order are linked to monolingual assumptions regarding the implicit status of English as that order's native tongue. Prior research on RT generally targets its Anglophone output (though its Arabic and Spanish-language channels have the biggest audiences). Moreover, the only research exploring disinformation's multilingual aspects are either accounts of algorithmic tools capable of identifying telltale English solecisms or introductions to computational methods of tracing the presence of English-language-originating disinformation narratives across other languages—a serious lacuna bemoaned by leading media researchers (Bechmann and

O'Loughlin 2020; Nguyen et al. 2022). Questions are rarely posed about disinformation's language of origin, its translingual force, its adaption to and reception within non-Anglophone environments, or its foreign providers that mine for legitimizing material in those environments (for one of a very small number of exceptions, see Toepfl et al. 2023).

Nor have researchers prioritized the issues that arise from the differing meanings attributed to concepts such as soft power and propaganda *across* languages (such discrepancies aggravate the confusion created by semantic disparities *within* English). Russian *miagkaia sila* is not the same as English "soft power" (Beggs 2021), just as *gibridnaia voina* differs from "hybrid warfare" (Fridman 2018). What Russian actors claimed was the honest projection of national interests is for their Western critics merely propaganda and disinformation, just as well-meaning British soft power initiatives are equated in Russia to rank hypocrisy. We can justify our own definitions of these terms, but to ignore those applied by other states is to misjudge the nature of their activities.

We offer a distinctive linguistic perspective on interstate conflict in the information domain. We also attend to historical factors. Conflict with Russia in the information zone has a long lineage dating to the czarist period, and allusions to Cold War–era practices are as common as they are misleading. Russian state practices under Putin may resemble their Soviet antecedents, but the goals, tools, and constraints differ. We pursue the principle of respect for difference across temporal as well as linguistic boundaries.

Although such frameworks are unusual in communications studies, this field has long abandoned the unidirectional models that persist in area studies. They have been superseded by paradigms involving ethnographic audience studies or targeting structural processes (Gillespie 2005, 2007), with some studies bringing structure and agency together. Indeed, much communications scholarship identifies the technological, economic, and ideological factors that have been undermining democracies since well before Putin. Pickard 2020 describes the United States as a "misinformation society," referring to its partisan, asymmetrical media system where tech giants incentivize conspiracy-framed news production for market gain.

Within this context, populism's accommodation with new media practices is symptomatic of a crisis of institutional mediation (Davies 2018b). When Russia's role is acknowledged, it is generally portrayed as an external manipulator able to exploit these trends. Narratives borrowed from the literature on Russia as a malign agent are appended to a second structure-driven literature in unamended form (Pomerantsev 2019), ignoring the reshaping of Russian state agency by transnational processes.

Mediatization Matters

The application of transmission models to Russia's communications activities is not universal (exceptions include Szostek 2020; Galeotti 2019). Their prevalence reflects a synthesis of enduring Cold War mindsets and computational analytics whose capacity to measure output at scale mesmerizes many in the humanities. Ironically, it is the digitally networked world responsible for *big data* that renders this influence problematic, for the horizontal spread of digital networks weakened the vertical processes by which politicians attempted to instrumentalize the media. This weakening is part of the infiltration of the

new logics into politics, commerce, and everyday life, a phenomenon captured in the term "mediatization" (Hjarvard 2008), whose relevance to Russia lacks systematic analysis despite the opportunities and challenges it presents to authoritarian regimes. By treating RT as a digitally empowered populist actor operating in a globally mediatized environment, we show how core components of mediatization both enhance and complicate current Russian communications strategies.

The mediatization dynamic reflects an interpenetration of multiple logics (political, commercial, technological) rather than a deterministic media hegemony. This dynamic informs our correctives to information war thinking as follows:

- Political leaders recalibrate information strategies to rapidly shifting media contexts rendered more unpredictable by the post–Cold War blurring of ideological and geopolitical distinctions.
- States cannot impose such strategies on the media actors responsible for their implementation but must negotiate with—and delegate to—them.
- These actors now operate within horizontal "assemblages" whose information flows they can neither "gatekeep" nor control via "agenda setting" but whose logics they must, through dynamic collusion with nonstate practitioners, internalize to influence (Chadwick 2013; Bennett and Pfetsch 2018).
- The democratization effect of universal web access hinders audience targeting and manipulation, notwithstanding the availability of tools of algorithmic control and internet restriction; vigorous Kremlin efforts to block access to alternative perspectives on its "special military operation" in Ukraine were far from successful.

Although information war analysts often overlook important contextual factors, human agency nonetheless remains important. Our thinking must account for interactions between structure and agency and for the transactions between different actors and the various processes of which they are respectively a part. It must also be able to identify and explain the feedback loops created by multidirectional information circulation. Disinformation is poorly rendered by battlefield metaphors.

From Mediatization to Mediated Populism

Mediatization explains why social networks share with populism a tendency to transgress against authority, a preference for vernacular expression, the ability to rally atomized individuals, and the prioritization of emotive content (Gerbaudo 2018)—all features germane to RT's engagement with online and broadcast audiences. Key to its self-proclaimed status as an alternative broadcaster is its willingness to counter traditional journalistic behaviors with a combative irreverence characteristic of social media. When we situate RT within the frameworks of "mediated populism" or "digital populism" (Mazzoleni 2014; Bartlett 2018), we refer neither solely to its online activities nor to the fact that the legacy/new media distinction is defunct but to an institutional identity reinforced by RT's post-2022 banishment from the Western communications landscape.

In adopting the notion of mediated populism, we reject prior criticisms of its

overemphasis on the media's role in fomenting right-wing populism and its corresponding blindness to socioeconomic factors (Bennet and Livingstone 2018). Such critiques are themselves blunted by their questionable treatment of populism as a fixed set of beliefs whose mediation is of secondary importance, rather than a flexible strategy capable of activation within, and dynamic interaction with, a range of ideologies and discourses. The same privileging of politics as a discrete, all-determining field accounts for the dominance of explanatory models that subordinate mediation issues to supposed Kremlin control strategies. We acknowledge, however, that mediatization unfolds differently in autocratic and democratic settings.

Despite its partial banishment from the Western public sphere, we treat RT as one of numerous populist actors operating close to its very center. In many ways RT's lingering presence there, as well as at and beyond its peripheries, points to the idea of a democratic core that is profoundly fractured. The fracture is not the result of an external blow. It is instead the rendering visible of the implicit hyphen separating, yet joining, the two terms of the collocation "liberal democracy." As Mouffe (2013) argues, pressure on this marriage of convenience, still unconsummated in many new Eastern European democracies, results from the combination of two different traditions, one valuing individual rights, consensus, and technocratic governance and the other emphasizing equality, participation, and the primacy of the people. It is fitting, therefore, that the gap created by the fracture should be filled by the liberal order's evil double: an illiberal populism in which authoritarian critiques of the fallibilities of liberalism form an unholy alliance with grotesque populist parodies of the anti-elitist principles underlying democratic governance.

RT operates within this very space. Networked with mainstream journalists from the liberal press—from whom it regularly poached until 2022—as well as alt-right outlets, it has been followed not just by extremists but also by discerning audiences familiar with traditional news sources. RT inhabits a multifaceted ecosystem where bona fide reporting intersects with hyperpartisan polemic, covert propaganda; tabloid rantings; and disinformation. Situating RT within this landscape, we reinterpret Kremlin communication strategies; reassess their effectiveness in the context of mediatization, measures taken against Russian media actors following the assault on Ukraine and the related unpredictability of participatory audiences; and provide a better understanding of how authoritarian actors shape, and are shaped by, media-populism dynamics.

Mediatization, Populism, and Performance

We follow Laclau's (2005) and Brubaker's (2017) understanding of populism as a mobilization of " 'the people' against concentrations of 'elites' " and as a discourse, rather than a class-based ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Davies 2018b). Our analysis shows that RT deploys a "populist repertoire" ranging from the discursive construction of "the people" to the use of low styles to trigger affective responses whose qualities we explore (Brubaker 2017).

More than merely adopting populism's techniques, RT has, as a product of advanced mediatization, *internalized* its communication logics, including via the social movement activists, cultural provocateurs, right-wing controversialists, political outcasts, and radical

satirists it habitually hires to front its flagship shows and fill its opinion columns. It reflects, rather than merely harnesses, populist attitudes and identities, with consequences that both facilitate and undermine its mission to amplify pro-Kremlin positions. Its acute attention to MSM attacks on it and its state sponsor; its brandishing of an underdog status cocreated with its adversaries; some of its staff's authentic commitment to this mission; and its intuiting of online registers, discursive practices, and humor modes all reflect the internalization phenomenon. Its relationship with populism is as much performative as constative: it is what RT *does* rather than what it *says* that matters.

RT's appreciation of its populist potential has conflicting implications for information war accounts of its place in the Kremlin's arsenal. The politics-media symbiosis it performs lends it credibility with certain audiences and an ability to assimilate populist idioms. This also allows it to integrate with, and learn from, local actors who share its operating environments, augmenting the threat it poses to a liberal order already under stress from these actors. Yet the ideologically disparate nature of online assemblages and the spontaneous "capillaries of transmission" by which affect traverses them means that states must often concede operational control to actors capable of intuiting the new processes from within (Hoyng 2020). For RT this entails an enhanced role for foreign staff whose lack of acculturation and propensity to harness RT for their own agendas makes them as much a liability as an asset. Indeed, tensions arise from the editorial leeway that RT's foreign stars expect in return for their collaboration, and off-message presenter scandals have accompanied Russia's flouting of international legal norms.

We illustrate the benefits RT gains from this situation. We also identify the pitfalls that it must navigate, including news consumption practices more discerning than is often assumed. When judged on information war terms—that of a sustained, coordinated Russian assault on global information space—our evidence indicates that the menace has been misunderstood.

Even prior to 2022, we found little sign that RT was expanding its audiences except in the Middle East and Latin America. Nonetheless, the downplaying of those regions (not to mention Africa and India, where RT has gained a foothold since the invasion of Ukraine) signals a failure to see beyond the liberal order's confines. This failure is linked to a tendency to portray RT as both a major threat and a pathetic insult to our intelligence. As Putin's actions in Ukraine illustrate, the geopolitics of US decline, the rise of China and India, and the fading of liberal values, including journalistic impartiality, mean that RT has, bans notwithstanding, yet to realize its disruptive potential. Closer to home, cracks within democracies resulting from voter alienation, the mainstreaming of far-right discourses, and the convergence of news consumption with the business models of technological giants offer RT opportunities to exploit populism's interpenetration with digital media. Yet problems arising from the mediatization-related loss of control over messaging and audience loyalty often outweigh any gains.

We explore these tensions across RT's diverse platforms, language services, and audiences through content and discourse analysis of broadcast news; computational approaches to Twitter corpora to establish aggregate user profiles and response patterns; qualitative readings of Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and audience comments; audience focus groups; and interviews with RT staff. These methods are fused through a shared focus on RT's routine reporting, as well as out-of-the-ordinary global news stories including the Salisbury poisonings, suspected Russian interference in the 2019 European Union (EU)

elections, the Syrian war, and Russia's war on Ukraine.

State of the Art/Art of the State

There is a growing literature on how Russia uses media technologies to advance its goals. We provide fuller reviews of this literature in chapters 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8. As we will show, much of it, though not all, is framed with reference to the information war or hybrid warfare. The two concepts have often been used interchangeably, as authors elide differences in the practices of clandestine operators like hackers and troll factories and of self-acknowledged state-funded media outlets. Books on the topic are aimed at broader audiences, eschewing original research or primary sources and relying heavily on Western media claims about Russia's actions. This typically applies even to academic works (Orenstein 2019).

Monographs treating Russia's information war are, as chapter 1 establishes in detail, generally written by policy and security analysts, political commentators, and journalists and, with few exceptions, offer simplified accounts. One such exception is Galeotti (2019), who highlights the shortcomings of the hybrid warfare concept, offering a nuanced account of Russian foreign policy initiatives. State-funded media activities—our concern—are treated cursorily, however.

Despite surging public concern regarding RT, there is no comprehensive study, as chapters 1 and 5 demonstrate, based on the analysis of primary sources across its different platforms and audiences while analyzing RT as a multilanguage, multiactor network. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several excellent studies have been published that interrogate Russia's war messaging or the actual, rather than inferred, responses of audiences to RT content (see chapters 6–9). Our book is aligned with this scholarly development. Building on Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) corrective to the existing literature that depicts Russian communication operations solely as an external assault on democracies, we situate such operations in the wider context of the media and social processes that shape contemporary democracies. We refuse to draw inferences about audience impact solely from the content of Russian propaganda, acknowledging the role of substate and nonstate actors and that audiences are more than mere consumers susceptible to manipulation. It is impossible to give an accurate state of the art on Russia's presence in the information environment if one reduces that presence to the art of the state.

Self-Scrutiny and Elusive Truths

Our challenge to unilinear accounts of Russia's war on the liberal order presupposes an alternative narrative. We are proposing a multidimensional empirical account of a single broadcaster, its output, and its audiences; we also present RT as an indicative symptom of, or a passive cypher for, a larger epic story about geopolitical conflict in the information age and the crisis of the liberal order.

Our preferred image of truth as necessarily convoluted connotes the distinction between

an observer perspective that associates truth with closed singularities and one that locates it amid an open-ended plurality of potential pathways. The objection to portrayals of RT as either an instrument of state warfare or a beacon of opposition to Western hegemony is not merely that it is a multifaceted organization operating at a remove from a state sponsor that is itself more elusive in its motivations than grand narratives allow. It is to recognize that RT functions at the intersection of all these narratives and that in specific contexts, the truth about it may involve distinct configurations in which each separate narrative relates differently to the rest.

The issue returns us to the importance of the liberal value of critical self-scrutiny. Four implications arising from this umbrella principle underpin our arguments: (1) by highlighting fissures within the polities whose claimed allegiance to liberalism is manifested in the "liberal democracy" collocation, we can grasp how external actors like RT collude with internal populist disruptors in exploiting those fissures; (2) recognizing that the liberal order is as much an identity as a set of universal truths facilitates insights into how RT's practices contribute to a self-Other dynamic with two further consequences: (3) a preference for explanatory models, including those centering on information war, whose reduction of otherness to a mirror image of selfhood produces distortive interpretations of the Other's behavior and (4) responses to that behavior that replicate rather than interdict it and that generate simplistic diagnostic tools incapable of accounting for the discursive complexity of propaganda and disinformation.

Chapter Outline

Our first chapter establishes the contexts in which Russia's approaches to political communication developed. Rather than inventing the disinformation playbook as is often claimed, Russian elites, we argue, benefited from mediatization and from the affordances the globally networked world offers to all disinformation producers. This strategy's internal tensions also create challenges that Russia struggles to overcome, resorting in the case of its assault on Ukraine to a brutal clampdown on media freedom and a propaganda blitz.

Locating RT within these contexts, chapter 2 traces its trajectory from its soft-power Russia Today manifestation to its rebranding as RT and its adoption of an anti-Western populist repertoire to its role as a disinformation apologist for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Drawing on interviews with its staff, we reveal how RT's pre-2022 operating mode reflected its simultaneous self-representation as official state mouthpiece, openly *counterhegemonic* alt-media outlet, and reputable broadcaster providing global news coverage.

Chapter 3 profiles the centerpiece of the network's television output: RT International. Drawing on content analysis of news broadcasts over two years, it argues that the network typically curates factual news in terms of the topics covered, the expertise platformed, and the resultant framings. Even prior to 2022, however, its coverage differed from that of world-leading international broadcasters, with populist communication postures that included the privileging of stylistic informality and sarcasm, conceived as a performative fight back against mainstream news aesthetics.

Chapter 4 approaches RT's place in the post-2022 media landscape by exploring its populist stance in relation to the 2019 EU elections. RT's multilingual coverage avoided

overt fabrications while articulating anti-Western narratives calibrated for local environments. Its obsessive tracking and rebuttal of EU accusations of Russian interference, however, highlighted its tendency to reinforce its pariah status to bolster its populist credentials. This strategy acquired new force within the Kremlin's Ukraine war narratives, reflecting a centuries-old identity dynamic in which Russia serves as the West's semiorientalized alter ego onto which it projects the image of its own dark underbelly (Malia 2000; Tsygankov 2014).

Chapter 5 exposes challenges posed by RT's immersion in the mediated populism environment. Unlike the EU elections, the 2018 Salisbury poisonings elicited a coordinated Kremlin campaign. Mediatization increases the reference points that news narratives must account for, however, influencing state journalists' agency in contrasting ways as governments seek to harness their reporting and as market imperatives oblige them to show at least minimal regard for professional credibility. This tension peaked when the Kremlin imposed on Russian journalists its line on Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. Yet, as RT's postinvasion reorientation toward non-Western audiences indicates, when underpinned by geopolitical reconfigurations, populist postures adopted by authoritarian regimes are not necessarily doomed to fail.

Identifying further challenges to RT, chapter 6 deconstructs assumptions about the gullibility of its followers while noting its appeal—a tendency in evidence after RT's prematurely recorded "demise" in 2022. We present a cross-platform analysis of RT's online audiences, finding that prior to 2022 RT's global Twitter followers used RT as a comparative reference point and were more heterogeneous and mainstream within their respective societies than was often assumed. Overall, we challenge anecdotal perceptions of RT as merely fomenting a toxic media ecology, showing that it adopts a range of strategies to bolster its audiences. We also note some substantive non-Western audiences whose attraction to RT's alt-media stances remain less affected by Russia's now cemented pariah status.

Based on qualitative interviews with RT followers in the United Kingdom, chapter 7 demonstrates their failure to bear out common perceptions of their uniform vulnerability to information manipulation. For some, RT's overt biases deconstruct the liberal illusion of balance and impartiality. Others endorse principles like balance but draw on their experiences of RT to relocate them at radically different, extreme points in the political spectrum. And still others hostile to RT's propagandistic output find intellectual gratification in their own capacity for meta-ideological analysis. Collectively, these followers pose challenges to how we think about disinformation's relationship with populism and liberal democracy.

Teasing out implications for the liberal order of Russia's war on Ukraine, chapter 8 argues that fact-checking and source-verification approaches struggle to explain disinformation's persuasive powers by failing to recognize the contingency of the discourses it invokes. Drawing on Russian media coverage of the war's early period, we show that discourses whose meanings resonate in Russian culture ensure that key narratives match prior audience assumptions. We identify Ukraine as a floating signifier common to both official and oppositional narratives generated by these discourses but accorded divergent meanings. The connections between disinformation and counterdisinformation practices, we conclude, mean that we must conduct the latter reflexively.

Chapter 9 argues that Ukraine's fluidity as a signifier is critical to the war's wider

consequences. It shows that the outrage at Russia's actions both hid tensions and exposed fault lines within the liberal order and on occasion triggered the West to project features of its own imperial past onto Russia, precipitating the fracturing of liberalism into moral universalist, conservative anticollectivist, progressive-democratic, neoliberal, and identity-focused variants. RT keenly sensed this process, and its suppression across Western media space is rejuvenating its narratives both *beyond* that space's margins and, via the spread of Ukraine-related "deep-state" conspiracy theories to alt-right ecosystems, *within* them.

In concluding, we argue that the forging of RT's pariah status at the penumbra formed by mediatization's intersection with neoliberal logic and participatory populism does not diminish the gravity of its provocative assault on liberal values. Rather, it reflects a dynamic whose cocreated nature renders it all the more insidious.

1

MEDIA COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, triggered a rapid transformation of all spheres of Russian life, including media communications. Even accounting for the constraints on freedom of expression that have been mounting since Putin's third presidential term, the difference between Russian media landscapes pre- and post invasion is striking. The media system with its significant, if shrinking, network of state-tolerated oppositional outlets, semiopen internet, and freely available global social media platforms was replaced within days with a far more homogenous media sphere that the state strove to control through systematic censorship while increasing the level and scope of reprisals for those who challenge the official line. This change reflects a drastic shift in balance between a political logic that prioritizes the immediate needs of the political system as understood by political leaders and a media logic that considers audience interests and journalistic criteria, commercial imperatives, and technological conditions (Strömbäck 2008).

Both before and after the start of the war, however, Russian authorities and media executives demonstrated a keen appreciation of the mediatization of politics and everyday life. The evolution of RT, straddling the Russian media sphere and the wider international media ecosystem, clearly illuminates the difficulties dictatorships now face in maintaining an effective balance between political and media logics and in harnessing mediatization to their own ends.[1]

The media coverage of two events less than a year apart can illustrate the recent changes. On May 23, 2021, an international plane was forced to land in the Belarusian capital,

Minsk, on the pretext of a bomb on board. The real reason behind the landing was the desire of President Aleksandr Lukashenko's government to detain an exiled opposition figure accused by the authorities of inciting mass riots that threatened Lukashenko's grip on power. The fact that Minsk, whose actions were condemned by European Union (EU) officials and the US government, is Russia's close ally made the affair politically sensitive for the Kremlin. Coverage of the story by different Russian media outlets pointed to a divided media sphere.

Differences existed not only between Russia's state-aligned outlets and oppositional Russophone media but within the state-affiliated sector too. Adopting a straight-faced style reminiscent of the Soviet era, the main domestic broadcaster, Channel 1 (2021a, 2021b), merely rehearsed the Belarusian authorities' false claims, whereas the leading state news agency, RIA Novosti, admitted what had happened while sarcastically highlighting the "hypocrisy" of Lukashenko's Western critics (Akopov 2021). Similarly, while acknowledging the facts of the case, RT International complained about double standards, quoting an American Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist critical of US foreign policy (RT 2021a). RT hyperlinked the journalist's own report, even though it criticized Lukashenko's actions (Greenwald 2021). RT's editor in chief, Margarita Simonyan, disseminated contradictory tweets first supporting and then criticizing Lukashenko, provoking sarcastic responses from Russophone Twitter users who recalled her botched interview with those who had poisoned the Russian-UK double agent Sergei Skripal in 2018.[2] Oppositional outlets still operating in Russia, such as *Novaya Gazeta* and the television channel Dozhd, adopted the same perspective as EU and US officials, and *Novaya gazeta*'s (2021) journalists helped expose the falsifications of evidence by the Belarusian authorities. As the internet in Russia was at this point only partially censored, these alternative accounts were accessible to domestic audiences, alongside reports by well-informed Russophone news providers based abroad.

Fast-forward ten months and a different picture emerges. On March 9, 2022, across mainstream Western media, including the BBC—whose coverage we monitored throughout the day—the top news story was the Russian armed forces' bombing of a maternity hospital in Mariupol. Our monitoring of Channel 1 coverage and NTV news bulletins revealed that state-affiliated Russian media failed to mention the event. Russian domestic television coverage was dominated by reports on Ukraine's allegedly planned attack on Russia that presented the "special operation" as a preventive measure. RT International, whose broadcasting activities had already been suspended in the EU and which was to be stripped of its UK broadcasting license in a week's time, dealt with Russia's aggression by deprioritizing the coverage of the Ukraine war compared to the Western mainstream media (MSM). Reports on international sports and on the supposed economic, moral, and cultural degradation of the West topped its list of news items. Oppositional media, such as Dozhd, were by now banned in Russia, and the sites of Russophone media based abroad, as well as of foreign outlets critical of Russia's actions, were blocked. *Novaya Gazeta*, which reported the hospital bombing on that day, remained an exception; it would cease publication by the end of the month (Roth 2022a).

Russian state-affiliated media began covering the hospital bombing only the next day, following clarification of the government's position. According to them, the bombed site was no longer a hospital but a military base (Interfax 2022). Our monitoring of Channel 1 live broadcasting throughout the day revealed an almost identical "analysis" of video

images claiming that the evacuation of wounded patients had been faked. This reflected its standard approach to covering the war. RT International acted more carefully, citing accounts from both sides while implying it had equal credibility. This regression to old censorship methods did not return contemporary Russia to Soviet times. Thanks to global communication technologies, particularly the social media platforms Telegram and YouTube, alternative news sources remained accessible within Russia to those who sought them during the war's early months.

In examining the evolution of the Russian post-Soviet media system, we analyze the importance of structural phenomena in understanding uses of information for the legitimization of current dictatorships. At the same time, we acknowledge the role of political and journalistic agency in highly personalized regimes like Putin's Russia. What happened in 2022 was not inevitable, but we suggest that the war, with its rapid reshaping of the Russian media sphere, was *one* logical outcome of a political system built since the 2000s.

Understanding Media Logic

The imperative for twenty-first-century dictatorships to reflect media logics in their policy making is captured in two analytical frameworks. One is that of the information war, adopted by multiple political and media actors, analysts, and academics (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014; Thomas 2014; McIntosh 2015; Pomerantsev 2015; Snegovaya 2015; Paul and Mathews 2016; Hoskins and Shchelin 2018; US Department of State Global Engagement Center 2020). Another is Guriev and Treisman's (2022) concept of spin dictatorships, which conveys important differences between twentieth-century dictatorships and their current successors. Neither framework helps us fully explain twenty-first-century shifts in the Russian media landscape, however.

As an analytical concept, "information war" has limited explanatory power because it was originally a term of practice invented to describe specific activities. Coined during the Cold War by the US military to highlight the role of information technologies in future warfare, it was used throughout the 1990s in Russia to refer to the rivalry between oligarchs on the domestic media scene. It was adopted within Russian official discourse during Putin's first presidency to delegitimize Western criticism of Russia's actions in Chechnya (Fridman 2020; Beggs 2021). By the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Western and Russian politicians and media were using the term to criticize their opponents and, occasionally, to represent their own activities. The fact that it continues to be used in a similar fashion across the temporal divide marked by the beginning of the war in Ukraine highlights the concept's analytical flaws.

The term's polemical nature reduces its analytical value further. Antiestablishment forces within democratic states began adopting the term before it fully entered the lexicon of authoritarian regimes. In the 1990s, Anglophone media outlets that positioned themselves as alternatives to the Western MSM claimed to be involved in an "information war" (McDowell-Naylor, Thomas, and Cushion 2021). Russian actors regard some of these alternative media (alt-media) outlets as models to emulate. While the origins and the history of the concept's public usage reflect the role of complex, transnational

communication networks, its adoption for analytical purposes encourages reductive binaries. The changing *realities* of the Russian media's relationship to the Kremlin have been compared with the *ideal* of the Western media as the fourth estate—independent, objective, and nobly holding the government to account (as reflected in Lipman, Kachkaeva, and Poyker 2018, 185).

Such accounts yield limited insights into the distinctive aspects of Russia's communication strategies. Most twenty-first-century dictatorships, including Russia before, and even following, the invasion of Ukraine, participate alongside democracies in a global media system. Here market imperatives push mainstream legacy media toward tabloidization of their content. They coexist and interact with hyperpartisan outlets, tech giants whose algorithms drive misinformation and disinformation to the fore, audiences who disseminate it because they mistrust mainstream sources, and authoritarian actors, as well as certain politicians within democracies who attempt to exploit these phenomena (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Bennett and Livingston 2018, 2021; Freedman 2018; Zuboff 2018; Pickard 2020). In this global system, actors of multiple provenances collaborate with and mutually influence one another, knowingly or unwittingly, circulating and amplifying specific narratives and foregrounding specific modes of communication. A close affinity exists between the tendency of online platforms to mediate affective content and populist communication strategies. As both democratic and authoritarian politicians and media actors regard networked affect as a useful resource (Davies 2018a), we must be precise about the place of authoritarian states like Russia in this ecosystem.

Launched conterminously with the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, and in a context in which hyperpartisan news, disinformation, and misinformation providers were already a world-wide phenomenon, RT illuminates how Russian media have inserted themselves into the global media ecology. The notion of insertion contrasts our understanding of how Russian media actors operate within the global media system with perceptions that these actors are separate from and external to it, mere instruments of Kremlin power to be wielded at will (see Van Herpen 2016; Innes et al. 2020; Iosifidis and Nicoli 2021). By assimilating to a wide range of alternative online outlets or partisan tabloids in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere and by similarly contrasting themselves with the "elitist" mainstream, Russian media actors often work as learners of new communication strategies and tactics, particularly those related to populist repertoires (Brubaker 2017).

Many scholars now rightly recognize the importance of acknowledging the transnationality of disinformation flows while accounting for constraints on the Kremlin's capacity to control them, the agency of Russian media actors, including those working for state-affiliated outlets, and the consequences flowing from this (Galeotti 2015; Toepfl 2016; Yablokov 2016; Mickiewicz 2017; Greene and Robertson 2019; Litvinenko and Toepfl 2019; Chernobrov and Briant 2022 Strukov 2020; Szostek 2020; Tolz, Hutchings, Chatterje-Doody, and Crilley 2021; Laruelle and Limonier 2021). We align ourselves with this trend.

The fact that technological advances and associated increases in global connectivity have shaped the transformation of both democratic and nondemocratic societies is central to Guriev and Treisman's (2022) concept of spin dictatorships. The term underscores the way in which many dictatorships rely on information manipulation rather than direct censorship and mass repression. Guriev and Treisman, for example, exclude from their list of spin dictatorships countries like Iran, whose defining features reflect its theocratic power

structure, and China, whose media system has been more effectively isolated from the global media ecology than Russia's.

Guriev and Treisman attribute to spin dictatorships the following features: a lack of democratic government, manipulation of the media as a key tool for maintaining power and the leader's popularity, the toleration of oppositional media with limited societal followings, efforts to fake democratic procedures, limited public violence, hidden censorship practices, openness to the world, and the absence of any need to inculcate a formal ideology, with a holistic Weltanschauung (a characteristic of old, fear-driven dictatorships).

These features largely described Russia's pre-2022 situation. In Guriev and Treisman's 2022 study, Russia serves as a starting point, though the authors acknowledge that in terms of using violence in foreign policy matters (in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria), as well as domestically (Chechnya; assassinations of oppositional politicians and journalists), Putin's regime was an outlier even before 2022 (165). The authors also acknowledge that during a major crisis a spin dictator can increase reliance on violence, "freeze" modernization processes, and resort to isolationist policies. Guriev and Treisman's conceptual framework still does not explain, let alone predict, the drastic changes witnessed in Russia following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Russian Politics and Media before 2022

Controlling Russia's media system has been Putin's central concern since his accession to power in 2000. During his first two presidencies, subordinating television to the Kremlin's needs was a priority (De Smaele 2004; Zassoursky 2004; Oates 2006; Burrett 2011). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, when mass protests against electoral fraud in 2011–2012 challenged Putin's grip on power, the restrictions on journalistic freedom were ratcheted up following Russia's annexation of Crimea (Simons 2015; Lipman et al. 2018). As most influential media outlets were now owned by the state or by Kremlin-friendly businesses (Vartanova 2012; Kachkaeva and Fossato 2016; Kovalev 2021), it was easy to ensure the replacement of editors and journalists not trusted to maintain the Kremlin line. Some of these went into exile, creating new Russophone oppositional outlets abroad, of which the news agency Meduza, based in Latvia, became a prime example.

In this increasingly restrictive environment, critical media that remained in Russia, such as RBC TV (launched in 2005 in partnership with CNN), began refraining from covering issues that might antagonize the Kremlin (Badanin 2022). Those that remained outspoken, such as Dozhd, were harassed by the authorities. In the context of increasing confrontations with Ukraine and the West, legislation was adopted to create a "sovereign internet" by enhancing the authorities' ability to monitor digital communications and to intervene, if necessary (Gorham 2020; Litvinenko 2021).

Regional protests in Russia in 2019, anti-Lukashenko protests in Belarus in 2020, and protests in Russia in 2021 demanding that the country's most prominent oppositional politician, Alexei Navalny, be released from prison further scared the Kremlin, triggering a new wave of repressive actions and bans on outspoken online outlets or the application of Russia's controversial "foreign agent" law to the likes of Dozhd and Meduza, as well as

scores of individual journalists (Yablokov 2021). Targeted physical violence was occasionally used to silence investigative journalism. Meanwhile, state-affiliated actors were flooding the Russian segment of the internet, Runet, with Kremlin-favored material (Kiriya 2021).

The grim picture of ever-increasing repressions did not tell the whole story even in 2021. At the time some independent local and national outlets were still able to articulate powerful critiques of Putin's regime that reached many Russian citizens. In the last three weeks before the start of the full-scale war, it was the oppositional outlets, *Novaya gazeta* and Dozhd, that were the most cited news providers across Russophone social media (Alyukov, Kunilovskaya, and Semenov 2022a, 7). When concerns about Russia's plans to invade Ukraine mounted in early 2022, Kremlin critics inside Russia signed a petition urging an end to the Russian government's "criminal adventurism." The text of the petition was disseminated by Ekho Moskvy radio station, which continued to air anti-Kremlin opinions despite the fact that most of its funding came from the Russian state-owned company Gazprom (Ekho Moskvy 2022). The petition was covered by RT International, which understood its target audiences would be familiar with it from other sources (RT 2022c).

To understand this dynamic, we must account for the nature of the Russian political system. Much literature on the Russian media has imagined it as operating through a "vertical of power" (Putin's own term), with the Kremlin systematically controlling key decisions and their implementation. Lucas and Pomerantsev (2016, 10, 31) suggested that "in Russia's centralized system, a single decision from the Kremlin ripples out to broadcasters, news agencies, social media, websites and individual journalists" (see also Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 31; Paul and Matthews 2016; Orenstein 2019; Jankowicz 2020).

The inaccuracy of this picture was illustrated during the first months of Russia's war on Ukraine when global and domestic trends undermined the very possibility of an efficient state machine, including in the media sphere. The neoliberal trend of outsourcing state functions, accompanied in Russia by high levels of corruption and unaccountable leaders, drastically impeded the implementation of specific Kremlin decisions. With a still semiopen internet, state-funded media were further hampered by the need to compete for audiences with outlets over which authoritarian regimes had little control. The globalization and monetization of centralized state propaganda limits its effectiveness (Gabuev and Tarasenko 2012). The war exposed the fragility of this balancing act between countering the challenges posed by the hypernetworked world and benefiting from it.

Countering techniques have evolved since Putin's rise to power. Litvinenko and Toepfl (2019) offer a convincing analysis of the prewar shifts that occurred in the wake of Putin's reelection to a third presidential term. They suggest that public discourses within authoritarian states can be divided into those uncritical of the political regime and those that are policy- and leadership-critical. The Kremlin's strategy of managing public discourse had been to ensure the dominance of the uncritical content and the minimization of the leadership-critical component. This was achieved by creating conditions that would push oppositional outlets to abandon criticism directly targeting top leaders and to articulate a vaguer critique of specific policies. RT's coverage framed it as a policy-critical rather than a leadership-critical statement. The more tolerant approach toward policy-critical content was abandoned with the start of the full-scale war, when one

specific policy decision generated monumental consequences.

Russia's media system thus resembled less a well-executed tool fully controlled by political leaders than a "messy structure" in which even state-affiliated media actors constituted a loose, chaotic network of players with differing relationships to the Kremlin. Galeotti (2017) deployed the "messy structure" notion to describe Russia's entire political system, showing that members of Putin's presidential administration, who often did not trust state institutions to perform their functions, acted as "handlers" of multiple substate actors to whom various activities previously undertaken by state bodies had been outsourced. Mindful of their own interests, these "freelancers" operated within Kremlin-established parameters while competing for its favors. They were expected to generate initiatives to advance Kremlin goals (Galeotti 2017). They therefore possessed varying degrees of agency. They included oligarchs with major shares in state-affiliated media outlets and prominent media executives on the one hand and private, low-profile bloggers willing to offer their services on the other (Tolz and Teper 2018; Yaffa 2020, 25–76; Zvereva 2020; Laruelle and Limonier 2021). Their existence reflects a distinguishing feature of contemporary neoauthoritarian regimes: their difficulties in establishing clear boundaries between state and private actors.

A related factor is what Treisman (2018) describes as Russia's "two-system" politics. He terms the first system, which all but disappeared in the context of the war, "normal politics." Here, freelancers—representatives of regional elites, big businesses, and media executives—exercised significant personal initiative. For the media this meant that even on state-controlled television channels like Channel 1, led by the talented executive Konstantin Ernst, quality programming could surprise those accustomed to the channel's politically skewed news coverage (Yaffa 2020, 25–76). RT's output, too, included high-quality journalism such as Oksana Boyko's *Worlds Apart* and imaginative social-media projects such as the Twitter project #1917LIVE to mark the centenary of the Russian Revolution (Chatterje-Doody and Gillespie 2020). The contrast between Boyko's credible prewar journalism and her later descent into prowar propaganda and disinformation encapsulates the changes in Russian state media.[3]

In the prewar context, it was for issues of particular sensitivity that the Kremlin switched to "system two," "manual control" (Treisman 2018, 16–18). Commonly exercised by the presidential administration, it was applied when the control of information flows appeared central to the achievement of specific Kremlin goals around issues such as the annexation of Crimea, the Syrian war, the 2016 US elections, or the Salisbury poisonings crisis. Here diverse agents, including clandestine hackers, managed by intelligence agencies, trolls, and openly operating state-funded broadcasters like RT were subject to central coordination. During the annexation of Crimea, the presidential administration reportedly appointed "special representatives" (*spetspredstaviteli*) at key media outlets to provide temporary oversight of media coverage (Gatov 2018). Thus, to mask Russia's culpability for the 2014 downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 over Eastern Ukraine, a state media–led campaign to confuse audiences through competing contradictory explanations was conducted, with multiple actors recycling the same misleading and false stories (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2018).

Less biased reporting, if even acknowledged, was usually interpreted by Western commentators as having the sole aim of "softening" audiences to disinformation, or as camouflage for it (Alpert 2014). In fact, both disinformation and quality journalism were

"typical" and reflected Russia's "two-system" politics within which journalistic leeway to experiment and produce quality output was acknowledged as necessary for managing public perceptions (Tolz and Teper 2018; Yaffa 2020, 25–76).

State-affiliated media now compete for audience attention within a media sphere that, even in its Russophone manifestation, is hybrid and transnational (Strukov 2020). To legitimize the power of incumbent elites, it has therefore been essential to recruit talented journalists. Oppositional journalists within authoritarian states understandably argue that financial incentives motivate their talented state-media counterparts (Badanin 2022). But even in the Soviet period, as Roudakova (2017) persuasively demonstrates, state journalists regarded themselves as genuine professionals. As our interviews with RT staff suggest, the opportunities they enjoyed within "system one" to produce quality output prior to 2022 allowed them to maintain professional identities, even if at other times they resorted to dubious practices (chapter 2).

Unsurprisingly, Russia's war on Ukraine saw the "manual control" system take over completely, leaving state-affiliated outlets with no option but to endorse the official line. RT and Channel 1 consequently faced a string of resignations (Meduza 2022). On oppositional Telegram channels, references in resignation statements to the Kremlin's "propaganda machine" were roundly mocked as authors were asked what they had thought about their earlier workplace. The factual answer to this rhetorical question is that the now mandatory and universal requirement for journalists to disseminate crude propaganda and disinformation has destroyed the basis of their prewar professional identities.

Russia's Pre-2022 Place in the Global Media Ecology

Alongside attempting to maintain control over political messaging, neoauthoritarian regimes strive to exploit modern communication tools to their own advantages. Russia's activities within the global informational system have troubled liberal democracies since the late 2000s. This concern heightened when the annexation of Crimea, the UK Brexit vote, and Trump's election as US president in 2016 sent shock waves across the West. These events were accompanied by significant volumes of manipulated or false information, making disinformation a major global challenge. Given the scale of Russian disinformation around Ukraine, Russia's well-documented attempt to use communication technologies to influence the outcome of Western elections, including in the United States (Jamieson 2018), and its rumored attempts to interfere in the Brexit referendum (Cadwalladr 2017), it was all too easy for Western political and mainstream media to focus on Russia as the main source of disinformation, externalizing a global issue also internal to the West. Typical of this phenomenon were claims that Russia pioneered the abuse of information flows, with "liberal democracies … failing to keep pace" (Lucas and Pomerantsev 2016).

As late as September 2020, leading Western media outlets identified Russian disinformation operations as the main threat the United States would face in its 2020 presidential election (e.g., Greve 2020; Herb 2020; Landay and Psadelakis 2020). In reality the main threat from both deliberately spread disinformation and unintentional misinformation derived from intrademocratic sources. Contrary to the consensus among most politicians and journalists, as well as numerous Russia experts, media scholars

focusing on liberal democracies date the origins of disinformation in its contemporary form to the last decades of the twentieth century and the exponential expansion of the internet (Benkler et al. 2018). Eviscerated by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow's foreign policy was pro-Western, and Russia was in no position to challenge the international order.

In the post–Cold War era, Kremlin efforts to establish a new, distinctive global role for Russia began in earnest in 2007. At this point the Russian economy appeared to be performing well, and Putin's own ratings were high, giving Russian political elites the confidence to take on the West even as its relationship with Russia was deteriorating in the aftermath of the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine (Tsygankov 2019a, 17–32). Simultaneously, Russia's new policy reflected a position of weakness. The color revolutions were perceived as a major threat to the Kremlin's grip on power, which was further challenged by North Caucasian terrorism and fears that nonsystemic nationalist opposition was proving effective in exploiting Russian citizens' identarian anxieties.

Against this backdrop Russia's political elites foregrounded as their main foreign policy goal an idea that had first gained some traction in the nineties: greater strategic cooperation with regional partners and the replacement of US-dominated unipolarity by a multipolar world. Both Putin in his speech at the Munich Security Conference and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its review of the Russian Federation's foreign policy argued that achieving this goal would require "a more equitable distribution of resources for influence" (Tsygankov 2014, 247). Implicitly acknowledging the growing mediatization of both public and private realms, the Kremlin identified information resources as important tools of global influence; Putin clarified that Russia's goal was breaking "the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon [mainstream] mass media in the global flow of information" (cited in Audinet 2017).

In developing this policy, Russian elites gave considerable thought to the methods needed to challenge perceived Anglophone hegemony. These included taking advantage of the role of commercial drivers in undermining the long-established MSM model (Krämer 2014; Pettegree 2015; Freedman 2018; Pickard 2020). By the 1990s, the internet had removed many barriers to the creation of new news providers, shifting advertising revenue away from legacy media to new digital platforms. The new funding model incentivized sensationalist and partisan content, challenging the earlier emphasis on impartiality, balance, and the careful verification of news sources (Tambini 2017). A shift was occurring in what Williams and Delli Carpini (2012, 16) called the "media regime": "An historically specific, relatively stable set of institutions, norms, processes and actors that shape the expectations and practices of information producers and consumers" (see also O'Loughlin 2020). Features characteristic of Western democracy—the distinctions between news consumers and producers and between factual reporting and opinion; the narrow pool of agenda setters and information gatekeepers—were now fading. News and entertainment were becoming entangled, and notions of objectivity and balance began to be seen as sham by newcomers to the landscape.

Alongside the economic opportunities offered by new technologies, political choices have underpinned the media regime shift. The rampant commercialization of public services has prevented democratic governments from controlling the digital dissemination of dis- and misinformation and from legally protecting and supporting public news services (Freedman 2018). New populist politicians have exploited popular resentment at

rapid globalization and rising social inequalities, using digital affordances to reach out directly to "the people" and bypass long-established formal institutions. Demagogues amplify grievances and channel popular anger against "elites," "migrants," and "minorities" (Brubaker 2017). Mainstream politicians and legacy media have been attacked as out of touch. Yet these establishment forces do not shy away from exploiting "elective affinities" between new media technologies and populism (De Luca 2022). This terrain hosts the multiple players with which RT and other Russian media actors have sought to integrate.

Scholars studying the US media system single out as a critical factor in the functioning of the Anglophone mediasphere what Benkler et al. (2018) call "a hard-right partisan group" of politicians and journalists. The end of the 1980s saw the emergence of proliferating right-wing actors describing themselves as alt-media and positioning themselves as overt challengers to mainstream legacy journalism, which they depicted as subservient to left-wing agendas (Peck 2019, 20–26, 40–55). Initially, this phenomenon seemed merely to reflect the democratizing power of new media technologies. Gradually, however, researchers noted the tendency of such actors toward the strong political editorialization of news, coining new terms to describe them, such as "hyperpartisan news outlets" or "alternative and partisan" news sites (McDowell-Naylor et al. 2021).

Hyperpartisan outlets acknowledge their disdain for old journalistic norms (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019). In 1996 the US broadcast network Fox News was launched. While claiming to adhere to these norms, Fox became increasingly hyperpartisan. By 2002 its ratings had overtaken those of CNN, demonstrating the public appetite for its output (Peck 2019, 24). In the early 2000s, a right-wing media ecosystem took shape that included traditional and new media. A pioneering role was played by Infowars, founded in 1999, to be followed by the Gateway Pundit (2004), Breitbart News Network (2007), Zero Hedge (2009), and the Daily Caller (2010). The now extensive right-wing ecosystem coordinates frequent campaigns pushing specific messages that include mis- and disinformation and silencing critical voices who challenge preferred narratives. The absence of an equivalent left-wing ecosystem created a structural asymmetry within the United States media system (Rainie, Anderson, and Albright 2017). It is no coincidence that in 2022 over 40 percent of the US population continued to believe that Joe Biden did not legitimately win the 2020 presidential election (Yang 2022).

The asymmetrical US media landscape precedes not only Trump's election as president but uses of disinformation by Putin's Russia in its interactions with the West. Like Trump, rather than creating dysfunctionality within the Anglophone media, authoritarian state actors have inserted themselves into it, emulating and exploiting the opportunities it offers (Gabuev and Kovachich 2021). Broadcasters like RT have succeeded in using local populist dissemination channels and communication styles to target audiences in democratic states, but they have been equally capable of operating outside it. This calculated ambiguity has allowed them to perform a balancing act in relation to their credibility among target audiences—an issue, as we discuss in chapter 5, more important to Russian state media than is frequently assumed.

Populist repertoires encourage an "attention-seeking strategy of provocation" (Brubaker 2017, 370; see also Gerbaudo 2018). For this reason they dominate cross-platform, multiactor campaigns organized to disseminate narratives advantageous to the sponsoring authoritarian regime. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Kremlin had fully grasped the potential that new digital affordances offered, and such campaigns

became systematic. Targeted first at Russian citizens and later at overseas audiences, they involved social media bloggers and digital reporters, ostensibly independent yet ready to be mobilized (Fedor and Fredheim 2017), as well as clandestine influencing units.

Russian state communication strategies in the prewar years exhibited clear parallels with right-wing US partisan media campaigns (Benkler et al. 2018). Both were marked by coordinated efforts to push specific messages and narratives, relying on multiple online and social media actors, as well as old media. In the United States the latter includes Fox News. In Russia, state-funded television channels are active alongside new media actors of different provenance (Tolz and Teper 2018). Thus, in authoritarian contexts the role of governmental and state bodies is very important. In the United States, by contrast, the main political and financial affiliations of partisan outlets tend to be with political parties, not governmental structures (Bradshaw and Howard 2019).

Authoritarian state campaigns undertaken by Recip Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey have been well researched (Yesil 2016, 2021; Hoyng 2020). This is not the case for Russia despite the centrality of such campaigns to Russia's communication strategy since 2012 (see Tolz and Teper 2018). The Turkish context indicates that they become fields within which state-affiliated actors attempt to exploit the digital information environment while also being challenged by independent social media users and online platforms that utilize them for their own ends. For this reason they are prone to being hijacked. Advanced mediatization no longer permits the straightforward instrumentalization of complex global networks of assemblages in which state actors are often outnumbered and vulnerable to the actions of participatory audiences and intrepid citizen journalists (Chadwick 2013; Miazhevich 2021); in this sense Russian political elites operate implicitly at a different mediatization stage than that of much of the environment they seek to influence (see chapter 5). This environment also reflects the tensions that emerge when, in harnessing populist repertoires for their own ends, state outlets internalize them and become subject to the logics that drive populist communications (chapters 3 and 4). No amount of repressive control imposed under conditions of war can fully resolve such tensions.

A reliance on diverse information providers, operating both transparently and clandestinely, was central to what Soviet communications strategists termed "active measures." They now require our attention.

Russian Media and the Soviet Legacy

Deep fractures within the post–Cold War liberal democratic order, along with digitization, made the output of outlets like RT profoundly different from that of their Soviet predecessors. RT's preferred communications model was in fact pioneered by the government of Singapore in the second half of the twentieth century (Guriev and Treisman 2022). Nonetheless, the Soviet legacy remains highly relevant to the Kremlin's present approach, especially given the prominence within Russia's political leadership of former representatives of the Soviet security services.

In his comparative analysis of Soviet, post-Soviet, and US (dis)information operations, Rid (2020, 315) discusses how the goal of driving "wedges into pre-existing fissures within the adversarial societies" was shared by both sides in the Cold War. Following its

reorganization in 2008–2009, this strategy informed RT's engagement with Western hyperpartisan, right-wing networks opposed to progressive values, as well as with left-wing movements concerned with social inequality (hence RT's sympathy for the Occupy movement).

RT is known for its opportunistic appropriation of the grassroots activism and respective conspiracy narratives of both the Right and the Left (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2022). This practice was also adopted by Soviet intelligence agencies (Rid 2020), which, like their equivalents elsewhere, understood that the most effective approach was to rely on factual information but manipulate the context within which it was presented. Now, too, most mis- and disinformation identified by independent fact-checkers relates precisely to context manipulation (Wardle 2019, 45–50). And, while intelligence operations deploying hacks and leaking genuine information involve subterfuge, because they conceal its origins, a significant proportion of prewar Russian state news reporting, particularly on RT International, amounted to factually accurate information, whether overtly manipulated or not (chapter 3).

As the veracity of Russian media output has varied, so have the relevant actors who have enjoyed varying degrees of connection with the Kremlin. These include internet trolls (keyboard warriors paid by the Russian state to bully its political opponents), sock puppets (Kremlin-aligned digital personas masked as Anglophone critics of Western establishments), disruptive clowns (the Kremlin-affiliated phone pranksters Vovan and Lexus), beneficiaries of transactional deals (Western renegades like George Galloway and Alex Salmond, given a platform by RT), "useful idiots" (high-profile foreigners who naively support Russian state broadcasters or endorse their narratives), and intercultural mediators (ranging from the likes of Mikhail Idov, a cosmopolitan Russian émigré whose serials were occasionally commissioned by Russian state television, to Bryan MacDonald, an Irish journalist who engaged actively with Western adversaries while not hiding his RT affiliation).[4] Scrutiny of the Cold War period could generate a similar, if less extensive, typology, the analysis of which would reveal the same reliance on mainstream Western journalists eager to disseminate newsworthy material of suspect provenance.

Parallels between Soviet and post-Soviet Russian communication strategies notwithstanding, significant differences should be acknowledged. Most importantly, while benefiting from the ease with which new communication technologies allow information to be produced and disseminated, information flows are now more difficult for states to manage (Rid 2020). In contrast to the Soviet period, organized informational campaigns and other practices of media control can now be sabotaged from within authoritarian states, as when the Russian oppositional outlet the *Insider* revealed the identities of the Salisbury poisoners and when the world learned about the online disruptive operations unit the "Internet Research Agency" (IRA) from a Russian oppositional newspaper (Tolz, Hutchings, Chatterje-Doody, and Crilley 2021; cf. Hoyng 2020). Financial and logistical pressures applied by the state to Dozhd were resisted, with some success, by crowdfunding initiatives. Laws adopted between 2012 and 2022 for controlling the content of Runet were implemented inconsistently, partly for technological reasons and partly because of user pushback (Stadnik 2021).

Units like the IRA—not an exclusively authoritarian phenomenon—demonstrate the challenges posed when information manipulation is outsourced to third parties with personal agendas and motivations. Employees are interested primarily in maximizing their

remuneration, not in optimizing the impact of their work; as scholars have demonstrated of non-Russian contexts, their campaigns around elections fail largely for this reason (McCombie, Uhlmann, and Morrison 2020, 109). The war in Ukraine, because it failed to result in Russia's quick victory, highlighted further challenges to the Kremlin's control over substate actors, such as the IRA's founder Yevgeny Prigozhin, in whose case the eventual means of overcoming the challenge became his assassination.

Most lessons from the Soviet period learned by noncovert Russian media actors, including RT, were negative. Russian political elites openly agreed that the Soviet media empire was defeated in the Cold War battle of narratives (Yablokov 2018, 50–78). During the Soviet regime's last years, media executives acknowledged that rigid ideological framing and systematic censorship discouraged audience engagement and should be discarded. The Soviet-era denigration of Western mass culture and the perception that cultural content should be uplifting, didactic, and politically mobilizing was replaced in the first decade of the twenty-first century with depoliticized, lowbrow material and then, since 2012, with soft news programs promoting political messages via entertainment formats (Becker 2004, 2014; Gehlbach 2010; Walker and Orttung 2014; Tolz and Teper 2018). Far from recalling Soviet-era broadcasting, the reporting styles, media genres, framing devices, and visual techniques characteristic of Russian state-aligned television output usually resemble those of the right-wing US cable channels Newsmax and Fox News.[5]

RT executives claim that Russian media outlets have been unfairly treated by their adversaries, suggesting that the practices for which they are criticized are no different from those of their Western counterparts. This narrative is deployed by other authoritarian regimes and, in a different variant, by antiliberal upstarts in democratic states (as with the savage attacks on BBC metropolitan biases by Britain's new GB News channel). According to this position, the reputation of the MSM reflects an experience in spin that is superior to that of authoritarian information providers. Asked how state-affiliated journalists could coexist with objectivity standards, Simonyan explained: "They coexist in the same way as on all other channels. There is no objectivity. CNN creates a huge fuss when a single US soldier dies … while not mentioning 2000 civilians who perish at the same time" (cited in Gabuev 2012). Simonyan's assertion conflicts with RT's own description of its mission, which foregrounds its difference from major Western broadcasters in terms of how biases in reporting are viewed (see chapter 2). Yet seemingly straightforward questions regarding the specificity or otherwise of Russian communications strategies rarely receive credible answers in scholarship.

Authoritarian states throughout East Asia, Eurasia, the Middle East, and Latin America share several communication practices. These states understand the need to control only key nodes in information flows, rather than the entire media content available to their citizens. Thus, in contrast to twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, under "normal politics" they can, within limits, tolerate critical voices that serve useful purposes—from providing feedback about societal moods to providing a pseudo-democratic façade.

Chinese commercial outlets venturing cautious critiques of the implementation of certain state policies illustrate the feedback function (Repnikova 2018). Russia's prewar tolerance of some oppositional media that, by contrast, questioned the very nature of Putin's regime served the Kremlin's greater need to maintain a façade of staged pluralism (Balzer 2003). The tolerance was due to their small audiences, which the Kremlin strove to drive down further while keeping them in check through occasional arbitrary

punishments.

Repnikova (2018) offers a sophisticated analysis of the varying roles of critical outlets in China's media scene. Her assumptions about prewar Russia, however, are based on claims made by Russian oppositional journalists, whose perspectives should not be taken at face value. Contrary to Repnikova's (2018, 187–205) argument that because of Putin's links to the security services the Kremlin disregards public opinion, it in fact constantly monitors public moods (Rogov and Ananyev 2018, 204–7). Loyalty and support from the public are essential to authoritarian rulers, and levels of support for their policies reliably indicate how information manipulation is working.

Russian oppositional media, too, provided a feedback loop enabling the authorities to adjust their behavior in response to critical messages received. For example, increased antimigration sentiment within official political discourse dating from the 2010s was a response to the popularity of the antisystemic right-wing opposition that maintained a strong Runet presence (Tolz and Harding 2015). Although criticism of Putin has been taboo for state-funded media, the criticism of Russian government policies, along the lines Repnikova (2018) depicts in relation to China, was permitted. If blame can be attributed to less significant state actors, policy-critical content does not present the same threat to the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes as negative information about top leaders (Litvinenko and Toepfl 2019). It was precisely because his online sleuth work targeted corruption among top state officials, including Putin, that Alexei Navalny received such harsh treatment.

Overall, authoritarian governments are more able than their democratic counterparts to interfere directly in state-affiliated media coverage of specific issues. In democracies such interference solicits severe criticism; in authoritarian states it is viewed as normal.[6] Similarly, intelligence services in democratic states are subject to parliamentary scrutiny and the perceived incompatibility of "active measures" with democratic values (Rid 2020). As Oates (2017) argues, differences in political systems, institutional structures, and legislation mean that similar practices adopted in authoritarian and nonauthoritarian media contexts can have different outcomes and impacts.

For example, right-wing hyperpartisan media activities in the United States occupy a different place within this democracy's political and media systems than informational campaigns waged by authoritarian states able to rely on close relationships between governments, the intelligence services overseeing covert "active measures," and noncovert actors of varied provenance and funding sources. Although the global environment constrains the effectiveness of these campaigns, we should acknowledge that the role of state support for them, the frequency with which they are launched, and the kinds of issues they address render them distinctive to authoritarian contexts. As our interviews with RT staff revealed (chapter 2), those who have worked for leading Western media outlets identified such campaigns as a phenomenon they first encountered at RT.

But what of Russia's specificity within the wider mediasphere? Claims of the uniqueness of Russian media space, whether direct or indirect, are frequent (Yablokov and Schimpfössl 2020; Kuznetsova 2021), as are portrayals of Russia as a pioneer in methods of information manipulation (Van Herpen 2016; Pomerantsev 2019; Innes et al. 2020). The nature of these innovations is rarely clarified. Rozenas and Strukal (2019, 983), for example, describe Russia as an "innovator in matters of information manipulation" in their generally excellent analysis of how Russian domestic broadcasters use asymmetrical coverage and selective

attribution (of criticism and praise) to associate bad news related to failures in Russia's domestic policies with external factors and good news with Kremlin actions. RT often adopts this strategy (see chapter 3). It is innovative only when compared with the Soviet media, where inconvenient news was simply censored. Long-established Western partisan outlets, including the UK tabloids and Fox News, were using this technique well before Putin's rise to power, however (Peck 2019). Similarly, Innes et al. (2020) link pioneering social media innovations aimed at influencing EU states to the Kremlin. These include follower buying, follower fishing, and narrative switching.[7] To support this argument, reference is made to another article that details the use of such techniques by the IRA (Dawson and Innes 2019). The article explicitly acknowledges, however, that the techniques did not originate in Russia. Authoritative accounts of the emergence of a hyperpartisan right-wing media ecosystem dominated by North American (dis)information providers further undercut narratives positing Russia as a disinformation pioneer (Benkler et al. 2018).

Right-wing hyperpartisan outlets are not the only Western actors offering models to authoritarian states. Public relations companies working for big businesses have long used manipulation techniques to tilt the playing field in their clients' favor—for example, creating the appearance of genuine scientific disagreement and debate around issues over which the existing consensus potentially jeopardizes profits (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019). Manufacturing apparent controversies is one of RT's common strategies around issues sensitive to the Kremlin. But such techniques significantly predate both RT and Putin. When in 1996 Boris Yeltsin manipulated domestic television coverage of the presidential election in his favor, his team was assisted by an American public relations company recommended by the Clinton administration (Stanley 1996). Under Putin, Russian political technologists adapted techniques to access voters on social media employed by Obama's 2008 presidential election campaign (Gabuev and Kovachich 2021). The use of astroturfing by members of the US Republican Party dates at least to 2010. In 2012 a candidate in the South Korean presidential election established a unit using voter-influencing techniques similar to those employed by the IRA in the 2016 US election (Garmazhapova 2013; cf. Keller, Schoch, Stier, and Yang 2020).

Notwithstanding insufficient evidence of innovatory practices, Russia's ability to use new technical affordances at scale is not in doubt. Its activities in the 2016 US presidential election constitute the largest-known operation of its kind (Oates 2017). Russia's "active measures" initiatives are also distinguished by the range of technologies they employ. The first such initiative during Putin's tenure took place in 2007, following the Estonian government's decision to relocate a statue in Tallinn commemorating Soviet soldiers of World War II. This combined the use of Russophone media to encourage Estonia's Russian speakers to riot against the relocation with a clandestine cyberattack on Estonia's computer networks (Jankowicz 2020, 21–51). As Rid (2020, 334) argues, the cyberattack's actual impact was minimal, yet its exaggeration by Estonian and Western politicians, the media, and military personnel guaranteed its strategic success. This development was repeated in 2016 when the IRA's astroturfing operation—a failure in terms of engaging audiences and affecting voter behavior—became a strategic success owing to the hysterical reactions of US politicians, the media, and the intelligence communities (McCombie et al. 2020, 109). Far from combatting Russian covert operations, overstatements of their impact enhance their effectiveness.

Inasmuch as it exists, Russian innovation is, however, exemplified by RT. First emulating alt-media approaches pioneered by Fox News, Newsmax, and Infowars in the 1990s, RT distinguished its modus operandi from that of other state-sponsored international broadcasters (IBs) by importing those approaches during the early to mid-2000s. Although Al Jazeera's English-language service, launched one year after RT's, positioned itself as an alternative to Western IBs earlier than RT, the two broadcasters followed different trajectories. Al Jazeera eventually embraced Western notions of objectivity (chapter 2). Following its relaunch in 2009, RT explicitly rejected this notion as hypocritical. How fully any IB adheres to objectivity is debatable, but its outright rejection by Simonyan established RT as the first overt challenger to normative expectations of how major IBs should function. RT influenced reorganizations undertaken by IBs in other authoritarian states during the 2010s. Yet even before 2022, it enjoyed limited success within the Western media sphere.

A New Context

Within the first month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, RT was banned across the EU and deprived of its UK broadcasting license. RT America ceased operations. Its efforts to insert itself into the Western media sphere seemed to have failed. At the same time, the Kremlin's management of the Russian media system also underwent a transformation, suggesting that the spin dictatorship repertoire was no longer deemed workable. Why was this the case, and how sustainable is the new approach? After all, in some regions RT's audiences have increased since the war started (see chapter 6). In the first months of the war, domestic channels were also effective in ensuring popular support for the Kremlin message among a significant number of people (see chapter 8).

The war context highlights the Kremlin's outdated interpretation of mediatization as a phenomenon still capable of being instrumentalized by governments. In a bizarre reflection of the idea of Putin's political adviser Vladislav Surkov that visual images can supplant reality (Hosaka 2019), in May 2022 oppositional Telegram channels widely reported on how, rather than bringing aid to Mariupol residents attempting to survive in the absence of the bare essentials, the occupying forces installed among the ruins mobile television screens celebrating Russia's "liberation of Ukraine from neo-Nazism."

The war also underscored the status of Putin's regime as an outlier among spin dictatorships in continuing to resort to the classic playbook of fear—an issue that Guriev and Treisman acknowledge but do not develop. In addition to overt censorship, draconian laws threatening critics of the "special operation" with up to fifteen years in prison were adopted, and efforts to isolate Russian media were intensified, even as the West applied its own blocks on access to Russian outlets.

This situation was in fact a logical outcome of earlier policies. Since at least 2007, Russia had already been functioning as a hybrid, spin-fear dictatorship. Appreciation of the hypernetworked world and of the need for openness had featured alongside old-style repression. From the start of Putin's tenure, mediatization had significantly infiltrated the military sphere. The skewed television coverage of the second war in Chechnya helped Putin rise to power and consolidate it. The orchestrated media campaigns characteristic of

Russian television output since 2012 have tended to focus on events involving the military (the annexation of Crimea, the Donbas conflict, and the war in Syria). In the decade preceding the full-scale war against Ukraine, short, successful foreign policy adventures were clearly seen by the Kremlin as a crucial regime-legitimation tool (Tolz and Teper 2018). The "special military operation" in Ukraine was conceived to fit this requirement. On the first day of the invasion, the most prominent television talk show predicted a celebratory parade in Kyiv within days (Rossiya 1 2022), and on the third day of the invasion, RIA Novosti briefly uploaded to its website a preprepared article indicating that the Kremlin expected the Ukrainian government to have fallen by that point (Akopov 2022a).

Three issues are therefore underplayed in Guriev and Treisman's analysis. The first is how difficult the current phase of mediatization, shaped by many-to-many distribution models and the transnational nature of information flows, makes it for spin dictators to ensure effective instrumentalization of media resources. Second, they overlook the informational trap into which dictators, old and new, tend to fall. Authoritarian regimes incentivize subordinates to tell them what they want to hear, making them a hostage to their own manipulation practices. This is especially true where, as in Russia, corruption is endemic and where the purpose of using state funds is often personal enrichment. As Bellingcat investigations revealed, money was wasted on a highly flawed intelligence analysis intended to underpin the "special operation" in Ukraine and perpetuate Russian state propaganda fantasies of Ukraine as a nonviable state whose citizens were eagerly anticipating liberation (Grozev 2022; Miller and Belton 2022).

Finally, despite gross misrepresentations of Ukrainian identity dynamics, Russian state media coverage of the war confirms the importance of ideational-identarian messaging for authoritarian self-legitimation. Kneuer makes a helpful distinction between contemporary authoritarian leaders' articulation of what she calls "missions" and their twentieth-century predecessors' use of holistic ideologies. "Missions" as discursive and performative constructs center on promises to deliver national security and solve economic and social problems. Unlike doctrine-based ideologies, missions "are substantially flexible and modularly constituted." They are adapted to fit changing conditions (Kneuer 2017). When security and prosperity are threatened and when the erosion of democratic rights requires justification, ideational-identarian messaging intensifies further (Kneuer 2017). A sharp increase in ideational-identarian messaging had already been witnessed in Russia since 2012 (Tolz and Teper 2018; Michlin-Shapir 2021). Its further ratcheting up in 2022 was therefore no surprise. As chapter 8 will show, identarian narratives that tap into long-established collective identities, and that feel true for some Russian audiences regardless of their facticity, have been used to justify the attack on Ukraine. Meanwhile, narratives that position Russia at the forefront of the struggle against Western hegemony have been favorably received in Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia, and the Middle East.

The current approach is likely to prove unsustainable in the long term, owing not least to the problem of credibility, particularly as mounting firsthand evidence about the war becomes available via returning soldiers and relatives of those killed in Ukraine.[8] The Soviet war in Afghanistan, with its multiple casualties and unclear purpose, became a key contributor to the radical changes initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev (Ro'i 2022).

From the outset, censorship and repression failed to ensure full Kremlin control over domestic messaging. The use of VPNs to facilitate access to blocked media rose sharply in

Russia after February 2022. According to the independent Levada polling agency, in March 2022 almost half of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, 34 percent of those between twenty-five and thirty-nine, and 26 percent of those in their forties were using VPNs. Forty-six percent of those polled confirmed that their usage began after the invasion (Levada 2022d). Subscriptions to the remaining uncensored social media platform, Telegram, rose from 8 percent in April 2018 to 37 percent in March 2022 (Levada 2022d). In the first three weeks of the war, 58 percent of those surveyed had heard of antiwar protests, rising to 72 percent among eighteen- to-twenty-four-year-olds, despite the fact that state television did not report them (Levada 2022b).[9]

Old Kremlin tactics of flooding social media with preferred content, to an extent, have been subverted by corruption. In May 2022 reports appeared on Telegram about state-affiliated actors attempting to buy channels critical of the war in order to fill them with pro-Kremlin posts. Yet claims to have paid large sums for high-subscription channels by those handling this operation proved false. In fact, as the Agregator pravdy Telegram channel reported on May 3, 2022, they paid small amounts to low-subscription channels, appropriating the difference. This confirms how information-manipulation operations outsourced to third parties usually work (Keller et al. 2020).

State television calls to isolate Russia from the global internet were voiced regularly when the war started and repeated incessantly by Simonyan during her regular wartime appearances on Rossiya 1's *Soloviev Live* and *Vecher s Vladimirom Solovievym* talk shows. As problems encountered by the prewar "sovereign internet" initiative demonstrated, this was not easily achievable. Moreover, the Kremlin was aware of the potential economic damage resulting from digital isolation and of related political legitimacy issues.

Finally, the use of repression was inconsistent. Despite new laws threatening tough punishments for transgressions, by June 2022 the number of criminal cases, as opposed to administrative fines, for antiwar protests remained relatively low, according to Russian human rights organizations (Roskomsvoboda 2022).[10] Putin's infamous speech of March 16, 2022, highlighted his dilemma. Using the feared dictator playbook, Putin referenced "national traitors" who should be purged. Yet, in spin dictator mode, most of the speech foregrounded Putin's economic competence (Kremlin 2022). Addressing negative reactions to Putin's intimidating lexicon, the president's press secretary immediately attempted to clarify that rather than threatening his citizens with a wave of Stalinist terror, Putin's speech was merely signaling that Kremlin critics should leave Russia if they wished (Tereshchenko 2022). Attempts to shape the Kremlin message's impact on different audiences domestically, in occupied areas of Ukraine, and further afield often appeared ad hoc, contradictory, and even desperate. Since September 2022, in the context of the successes of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and Russia's retreats, the domestic television coverage at times has also become confusing, as some invited pundits have begun to voice dissenting views on the wisdom of launching the "special operation" and the feasibility of Russia's victory (NTV 2022).

Our analysis recognizes that authoritarian states are but one component within complex, evolving transnational information flows that transect the borders between political systems. The information war model often adopted to explain neoauthoritarian communication strategies is of limited value, as it implies the division of the world into clearly demarcated democratic and nondemocratic media spheres.

Prior to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's communications strategy was best understood

as an attempted infiltration of the fracturing core of the liberal-democratic public sphere, rather than the wielding of an external instrument of attack from afar and at will. This approach accounts for the ways in which Russian actors engage and disengage with different global media actors over time. It also acknowledges that rather than merely harnessing media networks to disseminate preferred state messages, such actors internalize certain communication practices, particularly those associated with mediatized populism.

Although the spin dictatorship model rightly foregrounds the importance of media logics for most political systems in a fully networked world, it does not explain why authoritarians are prone to lose control over their messaging or why the policies and strategies of authoritarian state media are often misaligned with their actual practices. The spin dictatorship model also overlooks the drastic actions to which highly personalized dictatorships like Russia are prone when the dictator himself is in danger of becoming a hostage of manipulated information.

The highly restrictive measures imposed on free expression by Russia's personalized dictatorship in the context of the war on Ukraine, however, are leading to major longer-term problems. The first months of the war indicated the regime's intensified reliance on information manipulation but with the abandonment or undercutting of key modernizing elements in the earlier-established manipulation system, such as hiding the workings of censorship, avoiding overreliance on complete fabrications, and minimizing economically damaging information isolation. The chapters to follow will trace how these dynamics have shaped the communication strategies of RT. Chapter 2 will provide a window onto Russia's troubled and troubling relationship with (dis)information, populism, and the liberal order.

2

WHAT IS RT?

Having considered the influence of globalization's digital phase on the development of Russian media, we present both a broad-brush history of RT and an insight into its key operational and organizational features. We gleaned this information from interviews conducted with RT staff between 2018 and 2020 but discussed it with reference to Russia's war on Ukraine. As a result, many of these persons are no longer RT employees. The chapter concludes by again considering the contradiction entailed in advocating an emphasis on complexity and contradiction over the linear certainties of information war narratives while advancing our own framing of the broadcaster's place in the global media conflict. This tension and the related contrast pitting the teleological predetermination embraced by authoritarian ideologues against the open-ended uncertainties celebrated within liberal thought acquires new significance from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Today's contested digital space, in which state-affiliated broadcasters compete with multiple actors communicating at record speed, accommodates limited individual agency, allowing journalists, including those working for such broadcasters, to exploit "instances of interaction and affiliation involving diverse news creators" (Chadwick 2013, 74). The resulting tensions between orientation toward state-endorsed narratives and attention to market-driven imperatives are one of several phenomena linked to mediatization that complicate RT's relationship with the Kremlin, even during military conflict.

Although, as a neoauthoritarian state, Russia is not a central driver of the transformation of reporting practices and values attributable to mediatization's intersection with neoliberalism, its political communication practices are shaped by the new environment. In another twist to the chaotic post–Cold War order, Kremlin activities in

this domain, combined with Western counteractive measures, generated "New Cold War" discourses that suspiciously (yet misleadingly) resemble their Cold War predecessors. Competing lexicons of aggression and counteraggression, propaganda, and public diplomacy also mirrored one another in familiar patterns.

The use of "public diplomacy" to describe Putin's propaganda machine is contestable, but delineating the practices of the US-sponsored broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (a Cold War legacy) from those of RT or Sputnik is not straightforward, obvious differences in working practices and levels of government interference notwithstanding. As Szostek (2020, 2741) argued prior to the 2022 invasion, militaristic notions of an information war overlooked "Russian activities that resemble conventional public diplomacy (the elite Valdai Club discussion forum, *Russkiy mir* educational centers)" but are "regularly included in Western accounts of the Kremlin's information war 'toolkit.' "

Accounts of authoritarian-state international broadcasting operations conceived, however misguidedly, within the soft power/public diplomacy framework as mere "image laundering" lack explanatory power (Carter and Carter 2021b). The key questions guiding this chapter are why states like Russia launch international broadcasters and how these broadcasters adapt to the associated challenges and contradictions, including those generated by the involvement of their sponsoring states in military aggression.

One reason for the blurred boundaries between the linear targeting of propaganda/disinformation conducted by oppressive governments disseminating half-truths and supposedly legitimate Western soft power and diplomacy efforts is that the end of Cold War hostilities mandated more subtle approaches to interstate relations. Influence could no longer be exerted via ideologies and military blocs. It is no coincidence that Joseph Nye's seminal "soft power" essay appeared in 1990, midway between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, nor that Nye's opening sentence provides its framework: "The Cold War is over, and Americans are trying to understand their place in a world without a Soviet threat" (1990, 153).

Nye's essay was criticized for presenting as new a phenomenon practiced for centuries. Ironically, the Soviet Union's extensive cultural diplomacy strategy features prominently in academic soft power literature (Gould-Davies 2003; David-Fox 2014). Bolstered by Medvedev's modernization agenda in the late 2000s, Russia began theorizing *miagkaia sila* (soft power). Despite lamenting that it lagged behind its rivals in this domain, its reading of the concept was crudely unconventional (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). It emphasized the projection of state interests over the soft dissemination of values, for which it failed to develop its own internationally attractive model (relying instead on negating Western liberalism). This contrast is captured by the respective missions of the BBC World Service (WS) and Russia Today (RT), launched as an outcome of Russia's venture into the soft power arena. The contrast is attributable not to a deliberate rerouting of soft power for hard purposes but to a difference in how the term is understood. When Simonyan (2013, 2018) declares that RT "is part of Russian '*miagkaia sila*' " and that she sees RT as "no different from the BBC and CNN," she is not being wholly insincere. Her argument, however, is based on her self-incriminating juxtaposition of what she sees as RT's honest patriotism against the BBC's deceptive goal of masking UK interests as "impartiality." She originally equated RT's patriotic mission in a hostile operating environment with that of Russia's Ministry of Defence in the aftermath of the Georgian war of 2008, indicating that, for Russia, war and information manipulation have long been mutually complementary.

Suggesting that RT's profile fits definitions of soft power is controversial, given its "lack of a positive vision" (Tafuro 2014). Yet even in 2014 (after the channel's 2009 switch from promoting Russia's world reputation to fostering anti-Western opinion), the *Guardian* described its activities around the Ukraine crisis as a "soft power onslaught" (Johnston and Plunkett 2014). Contradictions in opinions of RT's relationship with soft power reflect uncertainty about the concept's meaning. This uncertainty accounts for the proliferation of associated terms: "Negative soft power" (Fan 2008), "smart power" (Nye 2009), "manipulative smart power" (Strukov 2016), "oppositional soft power" (Rawnsley 2015), and "nation branding" (Kerr 2013), to name several. Even Nye's attempt to establish "soft power" as an umbrella term—the exercising of power through attraction rather than coercion—that incorporates public diplomacy (government efforts to influence foreign publics) and cultural diplomacy (the deployment of a country's cultural assets to enhance its image) is strained by a blurring of categories; Hollywood's saturation by US values allows it to conflate public and cultural diplomacy functions.

RT's shift from the overt dissemination of positive images of Russia to negative assaults on its adversaries explains the channel's aspirations to advance alternative narratives touting ruptures in the geopolitical power balance and the emergence of new counterhegemonic values (a narrative into which Russia's war on Ukraine was readily accommodated). By embracing principles that enjoy global support—like those behind antiwoke rhetoric—RT insinuates that Russia is the driving force behind them. As Dougherty (2014) argues, since Russia positions itself as the "Un-West" by attacking Western "moral hypocrisy," it believes its message is "gaining traction" (a belief unshaken by the powerful Western consensus condemning its actions in Ukraine). Putin's boast does not diminish the fact that effective soft power requires (1) universally appealing values and (2) the occlusion of the interests of the state purveying them—hence the value to Britain of the BBC's status as the acme of impartiality. Our analysis of RT's navigation of the fecund yet risky terrain of global populism references this dual requirement.

Contradictions in that logic emerge when we juxtapose the BBC (a semiautonomous outlet with indirect state oversight) and RT (directly Kremlin sponsored) and cultural diplomacy (normally carried out by arts institutions shaped by market imperatives) with public diplomacy (government led). The heterogeneity and indeterminate boundaries of modern states and the complex global forces they confront undermine soft power's assumed unidirectionality and intentionality.

One example is the controversy around Russia's Tajik entrant for the 2021 Eurovision song contest. Selected by state television's Channel 1, the woman, Manizha, was attacked by nationalists for her socially liberal views and non-Russian ethnicity. Channel 1, which at the time still operated at one stage removed from the Kremlin, intuited that Russian cultural diplomacy was better served by a singer whose sensibility aligned with Eurovision's principles than by parroting the Kremlin's conservative values. This tension inflects our argument about RT, whose mission requires it, state sponsorship notwithstanding, to address progressive audiences.

The digitally globalized and ideologically depolarized post–Cold War environment challenges states projecting power in the old pre-1991 mode. Liberal democratic states, always fragile coalitions, endure pressure from populist forces that, fueled by the democratizing power of the internet and the internal contradictions of post-2008 free-market capitalism, undermine their inner coherence and ability to engender trust (Davies

2018a). A preference for the outsourcing of activities, partly a response to popular mistrust in states' abilities to ensure the efficient delivery of services and partly a recognition of their failure to grasp grassroots sentiments, extends beyond liberal democratic environments.

Yet the dissipation of Cold War certitudes, along with the growth of fickle audiences with more diverse narratives to select and more tools to access them, increases the onus on states to delegate public diplomacy strategies to substate and nonstate organizations attuned to audiences. The professional knowledge and empathy needed to enter, let alone change, mindsets require operational autonomy from rigid state direction. The "culture" in cultural diplomacy is the prerogative of practitioners (filmmakers, ballet companies) with tenuous links to their respective states. Combining this with uncertainty over audience responses to cultural and public diplomacy missions, and over their meanings, imparts contradiction to the terms "soft power" and "cultural diplomacy" (Hutchings 2020a).

RT Then and Now

RT commenced broadcasting in 2005 as Russia Today. It was the brainchild of the former media minister Mikhail Lesin and the deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration Aleksei Gromov, whose oversight of Russia's foreign strategy accords him authority over RT (Galeotti 2017). It operated under the auspices of an "autonomous nonprofit organization" established by the state's primary news agency, RIA Novosti, and was called TV-Novosti, but because this organization is resourced by the Federal Agency on Press and Communications, Russia Today's relationship to the state is self-evident (as Ofcom noted when canceling its UK broadcasting license in 2022). Shortly after its founding, RIA Novosti's director, Svetlana Mironiuk, captured its early traditional soft power goals, asserting: "In the West Russia is associated with three words: communism, snow and poverty.… We would like to present a more complex picture" (quoted in Osborn 2005).

Russia Today's young editor in chief, Simonyan, whose meteoric rise owed much to her skill in inflecting the Kremlin's dubious account of the 2004 Beslan school siege with pseudo-local authenticity when reporting the event for regional state television, aimed for a "professional format" akin to the BBC that would "reflect Russia's opinion of the world" and present a "more balanced picture" (RIA Novosti 2005). It was part of a wider drive to adapt "soft power" to the Russian context. Applied to RT today, Simonyan's claim of balance appears cynical. Yet US outlet Fox News also uses the slogan "balanced and fair," a phrase it deploys, like RT, to distinguish its coverage from supposedly elitist mainstream media (MSM) prejudices. In a *New Statesman* interview, Simonyan refused to accept comparisons with Fox while acknowledging their pertinence (Bullough 2013). Moreover, Peck's (2019) argument that Fox's success owes more to its appropriation of two class-based styles rooted in US public culture—one derived from populist politics and the other from tabloid journalism—than to a specific right-wing agenda informs our account of RT's engagement with populism.

Exploiting the new environment, Russia Today began broadcasting via cable networks in English, subsequently launching Arabic, Spanish, and French channels and later, a documentary channel and specific versions of its English-language output targeting the

United States and the United Kingdom (where, until 2022, it was available via the Freeview digital package). A Serbian-language web service, RT Balkan, was added following the invasion of Ukraine. RT's English-language umbrella channel, RT International, provides much content for the other channels, including online Chinese, German, and Russian versions, though RT America generated its own material. RT had numerous Facebook pages and a YouTube version claiming to be "the most watched news channel" on that platform (RT 2020). The Ukraine war torpedoed this claim and vast segments of the social media output of RT, which adapted by moving its videos to the Gab and Rumble platforms. It remains active on Twitter and Instagram and accessible both beyond the West and within it (via VPNs, its smartphone app, mirror sites, and ineffective blocking of its different language websites across the jurisdictions where it is restricted). Its dedicated live video-streaming service, RUPTLY, still makes frequent use of "citizen reporter" material filmed on smartphones and has sometimes been first on the scene at world events (Gold 2019).

Having drawn attention for its pro-Russian coverage of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, in 2009 Russia Today rebranded itself as RT, a gesture widely seen as an attempt to hide its state propaganda motives. In a follow-up move linked to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, a key populist moment (Brubaker 2017), in 2010 it unveiled its "Question More" slogan, adopted as a new brand identity enabling it to position itself as the preferred channel for opponents of the West's MSM biases. (It is not coincidental that RT America was launched in the same year). In this sense it resembles other counterhegemonic outlets, including Al Jazeera (Painter 2008).

RT was the first state-funded, counterhegemonic broadcaster to adopt the provocative alternative media (alt-media) tabloid stances that align it with US conservative outlets, including Fox, all of which also target the MSM, whose "funeral" was celebrated in a controversial YouTube advertisement for RT's *Watching the Hawks* television program.[1] Despised throughout the West, especially following the events of 2022, RT enjoys respect elsewhere; India Today considers RT its model; China's CGTN has sought advice from its Russian partner (CGTN 2018); Latin America's Spanish-language Telesur channel likewise draws inspiration from RT (Morales 2022). During this second phase, RT began invoking a geopolitical shift away from a US-dominated unipolar world to one of multiple power centers, including Russia, with the "multipolar world" narrative providing a bridge with RT's first phase (RT 2013).

RT earned its reputation for conspiratorialism during its second phase, especially in the United States, where the margins of political culture had long been influenced by the phenomenon. A short-lived investigative series hosted by Julian Assange aired in 2012, the year when RT launched Abby Martin's hard-hitting antiestablishment show *Breaking the Set* and its "investigative documentary" program *Truthseeker*, canceled in March 2014 following controversies arounds its claims of faked Western chemical weapons attacks in Syria (Jackson 2015). The program's provocative title aligned with William Davies's (2020) account of how, rather than fostering "anything goes" orgies of posttruth relativity, the current populist era is forging a "new regime of truth" within which publics are intuitively suspicious of traditional institutions of knowledge while placing their trust in "truth seekers" claiming to unmask global elites (149). Insights into RT's internal culture, however, reveal that even its star US presenter resiled from its excessive conspiratorialism (Alpert 2014).

Although far-fetched diatribes against global elites were toned down in RT

International's output (remaining a feature of RT America during Trump's presidency), they continued to appear often in online op-ed columns, framed by disclaimers that such views were not attributable to the channel. RT's Facebook pages were also a primary vector for antilockdown conspiratorialism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hall 2020). The op-ed columns featured contributions from "experts" of the Right and the Left who share extreme, counterhegemonic worldviews consistent with populism (Chatterje-Doody 2018). Many have dubious credentials, but they included public intellectuals like Slavoj Žižek, whose contrarian views suited RT until he savaged Russia's war on Ukraine (Žižek 2022). As our personal experience attests, RT is caught in a paradox; keen to boost its credibility, it invites respectable scholars to air opinions inconvenient to it, only to be rebuffed because such scholars refuse to tarnish their reputations.

Beyond their core status as expressions of grassroots mistrust in establishment narratives, conspiracy theories serve multiple functions dependent on context; in the Russian media environment, they help political elites corroborate perceptions that they control events and have full knowledge of any underhand efforts to subvert them (Radnitz 2021). They also fulfill commercial imperatives, contributing to the clickbait culture that infiltrates RT and whose wavering reliance on conspiracies is explicable given RT's oscillation between these different functions.

During its second phase, RT began building mutual amplification connections with various nonstate and substate online actors in Russia and globally. These included far-right US digital alt-media outlets such as Breitbart News Network and Project Veritas and the far-left Grayzone. There is some limited evidence of tacit collusion between RT and fake websites and social media accounts set up in Africa during the Ukraine war by Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group (Stangler 2023). But as Audinet and Dreyfus (2023) show, Russia's strategy in Africa was primarily that of the uncoordinated, dual presence of the Wagner Group and RT/Sputnik, with the two entities sharing common African partners (Mali Actu in Mali and Afrique Media TV in Cameroon, for instance) but no direct collaboration. Audinet and Dreyfus (2023) also note that prior to the failed Wagner Group mutiny of June 2023, RT and Sputnik had been increasingly covering Wagner Group activities in their reporting on Africa and the Ukraine war.

A third phase prompted by the Crimea annexation crisis of 2014 saw RT transform its counterhegemonic stance into a more targeted weapon to rebut the opprobrium generated by Russia's actions. Here, too, the "multipolar world" narrative provided a bridge. Mirroring the rhetoric of Lavrov, Russia's seasoned foreign minister, RT published a provocative editorial declaring that Western sanctions were merely hastening the advent of multipolarity (Draitser 2014). This new phase was initially characterized by close collaboration between RT and Russian intelligence services; Simonyan boasted of RT's scoop in publishing a secretly recorded phone call exposing European Union (EU) concerns over the identity of the Maidan snipers shooting at protestors in the Kyiv uprising (Lake 2014).

The consolidation of the Western narrative highlighting Russia's information war on democracy also dates from 2014. While RT's cooperation with Russian state operatives is not sustained consistently, the information war narrative still dominates both external perceptions of the broadcaster, and its own reporting strategies, within a fourth development phase. Here RT returned to the wider counterhegemonic agendas of phase two, with the prior emphasis on wild conspiracies now overridden by populist practices

derived from new social media idioms. It simultaneously expanded the Russophobia narrative honed during the Crimea crisis, fully realigning with state agendas in contexts in which Russian interests are at stake, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine. From 2015 to 2022, however, RT's Ukraine coverage diminished considerably as it noted the antipathy that Russian actions had elicited among Western audiences.

The 2020–2021 Navalny protests—in which Kremlin interests were likewise threatened—resulted in both naked collaboration with Russian authorities (an exclusive interview with the jailed Navalny by Maria Butina, formerly imprisoned in the United States for spying and subsequently an RT presenter) and a fuller account of the objections of Navalny's supporters than that provided by RT's domestic counterparts (Tickle 2021). Indeed, Butina's interview, widely covered across domestic Russian media, highlights a further development; in 2021 RT's Russian-language output received a funding boost, signaling that the Kremlin had identified not only its value as a domestic propaganda tool to address Putin's declining popularity but also its potential appeal to Russophone audiences in postimperial former Soviet space.

The overlaps between the domestic and international reporting of the Butina interview indicated the Kremlin's tendency to coordinate coverage of especially sensitive news. At the commencement of RT's third phase in December 2013, Mironiuk, who had formulated RT's original mission with reference to traditional soft power goals, was fired as editor in chief of RIA Novosti, and Simonyan was appointed editor in chief of the new Rossiia Segodnia agency, created by Putin's executive order to tighten control of all Russian media outlets and better align international and domestic news output. Condemned for disseminating disinformation about Russia's annexation of Crimea and covert intervention in Eastern Ukraine, RT in 2017 was named in a report by the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence concluding that Putin had ordered a campaign to disrupt the US electoral process (Smith and Swaine 2017). RT's pariah status, cemented in the West and exploited by RT for its own anti-Western populist promotion purposes well before the Ukraine war, acquired new potency following restrictions placed on it after February 2022.

The aftermath of the Crimea annexation saw the creation of the Sputnik news agency (with radio station and online platforms). Sputnik's content and style complement RT's, but the fact that it is less constrained by the foreign regulatory powers applying to traditional broadcasters allows it to adopt more provocative tactics (Birge 2022).[2] Sputnik has thus been a more aggressive proponent of the post-2014 emphasis on Western Russophobia, the exposure of which served to unify all four phases in RT's development. These phases were less bounded temporal segments than interlocking components within a single system, each of which has been foregrounded in different contexts.

The RT Operation

Until 2022 RT was a large international organization. According to prewar LinkedIn data, it employed 2,856 staff worldwide (including 1,000 journalists).[3] From 2012 to 2022 it enjoyed an annual budget of more than $300 million (BBC World Service Group, the world's biggest broadcast newsgathering operation, is allocated under $400 million per year) and prior to the various bans imposed on it earned supplementary income from cable

television subscriptions and advertising. It had twenty-two bureaus in nineteen countries (including two in the United States) broadcasting in six languages and claiming over four billion YouTube views (though these figures are probably boosted by bots). RT International and the channel's Spanish, French, and Arabic operations still reach audiences in India, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Other than RT America and RT UK, which closed in 2022, all RT's channels continued to operate following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, addressing audiences not just within Western media space but also beyond it. A snapshot analysis of selected RT Twitter accounts carried out via VPNs in September 2022 revealed that those for RT International, Arabic, and Spanish, as well as for Sputnik International, were available in India, Egypt, Venezuela, and Argentina, among other countries, despite being restricted throughout Europe and North America. India has become a primary target for RT International; the biographical details on its Twitter account now link to an RT India Telegram channel, and its banner has changed from "Question More" to "Freedom over Censorship, Truth over Narrative." Together with the subsequent establishment of RT Balkan, this underlines how Western responses to Russia's war on Ukraine have reinforced RT's pitch both to a non-Western world receptive to its counterhegemonic branding and to audiences with perceived sympathy for Russia.

RT overstates its audience figures. Emphasizing "reach," as recently as May 2021 it still boasted that it could "be watched" by seven hundred million households in more than one hundred countries and eighty-five million households throughout the United States alone.[4] The fact that it was excluded from the influential Nielsen ratings indicates that its actual prewar audience figures fell below eighteen million households. The daily viewing figures given in chapter 6, however, show that Middle Eastern and Latin American television audience numbers are far higher—an important qualification regarding RT's geopolitical significance.

RT's claim to be the first channel to have achieved a billion YouTube hits is disingenuous; bots aside, most of its YouTube videos are clickbait, with little evidence that this significantly increases attention to news content (Chatterje-Doody 2018). During the 2020 US presidential election, despite predictions of large-scale "electoral interference," RT's YouTube channel was outperformed by domestic far-right outlets like Newsmax (Tolz and Kazakov 2020). Volume-wise, however, RT's YouTube channel prior to 2022 was outstripping its rivals (including BBC WS, Al Jazeera, CNN, and Press TV; Richter et al. 2015). Clickbait aside, it had focused its efforts on the Arabic and Spanish versions of its YouTube channels and scored success with certain subjects, including Ukraine (Orttung, Nelson, and Livshen 2015). On Twitter, which now restricts its tweets geographically, RT's performance and audience engagement has likewise been inconsistent.

Reasons for RT's poor television performance vary. They include the strictures imposed by the Western jurisdictions within which RT operated until its broadcasting rights were terminated completely (the online environment being far less regulated). The UK media regulator Ofcom has a powerful monitoring remit. RT France, launched in 2017, was repeatedly threatened by the Emmanuel Macron administration before the EU finally acted in February 2022 (RFE/RL 2018; RT 2018e).

Paradoxically, however, the caution regarding adherence to journalistic standards that such constraints instill added credibility among some audiences to RT's claims to provide, like Fox News, a "balanced" alternative to the "biased" MSM (an assertion whose plausibility for some viewers is corroborated by our audience research). Indeed, the fact

that the largest portion of RT's budget was, until 2022, spent on its least successful platform is unsurprising. Television was RT's symbolic anchor. Its status as an international broadcaster enabled it to claim political parity with its MSM rivals, even if its successes were concentrated in non-TV arenas. That status has, at least in the West, now been squandered.

RT's aspirations to respectability infuriate Western governments concerned for viewers they assume are vulnerable to manipulation. Apart from testing these assumptions, subsequent chapters will consider RT's response to these accusations and investigate the self-perpetuating dynamic that such exchanges initiate. Another twist in the logic of this dynamic is that heavy investments in television compelled RT to justify that expenditure by improving poor ratings (with the Middle East and Latin America remaining exceptions). Leaked internal documents reveal transparency within RT's top management tier about the dishonesty with which it presents its performance and anxiety over what failure to rectify the problem might mean for future Kremlin support (Zavadski 2017). A further contradiction (acknowledged in an interview with a highly placed RT staff member on May 18, 2020) is that negative publicity generated by audacious television coverage that provokes Western anger is considered a sign of success; the twin paradox, mirrored and therefore doubled on each side, is that RT aspires at once to respectability and opprobrium while Western establishments are outraged equally by RT's pretense at normality and its breaches of that normality. The curious, spiraling dynamic, which received a new twist following the mutual post-Ukraine invasion bans imposed first by Western governments on Russian media and then the reverse, is a central concern for us.

RT's participation in market-led ratings battles led it to deviate from the practices of its domestic peers and occasionally its sponsoring state's policy positions. Ironically, to justify its sponsorship RT overlooks the effective state taboo on mentioning Navalny (his name was, until his imprisonment, rarely uttered on state TV). Navalny's frequent presence in Western Russia coverage meant that by ignoring him, RT would alienate audiences for whom it is never the sole news source. Equally, the same consumer-dominated market creates opportunities requiring a (partly performative) departure from Russian state postures, even since the military assault on Ukraine.

Yet adaptations to national environments, including those in which RT has no broadcasting stake, belong to a set of localizing adjustments. This lends a chameleon-like quality to RT's behavior as it moves spatially from territory to territory and temporally through different phases in each society's political development. In its ultimate form, localization approaches full assimilation; prior to the termination of RT France's European broadcasting operation in 2022, its director saw his role as leading a French channel in a French media environment (Littow 2019). RT was indeed prominent among French-based broadcasters in endorsing the cause of the Yellow Vest antigovernment protest movement (Guckert 2022).

During the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the coverage of events on RT France's website differed markedly from that of domestic Russian outlets, openly describing Russian actions at various points as "an attack" and "an invasion," rather than the euphemistic "special military operation" mandated by the Kremlin. It featured a prominent article on Maria Ovsiannikova's now famous antiwar protest live on Channel 1, accompanied by an open acknowledgment of the widespread condemnation with which Russia's rushed anti–fake news legislation was met. At the same time, its opinion columns

followed a more predictably pro-Kremlin line. After the severe EU-wide restrictions and bans imposed on all Russian media outlets, RT France reoriented itself to French-speaking African audiences, adopting an avowedly anti-Western, anticolonial line and refocusing its coverage on events on the African continent. As Audinet (2023) shows, this has included the signing of multiple cooperation agreements with local African media to promote RT content and a dramatic increase in the volume of coverage of African affairs.

At the other end of the scale, RT Russian, whose audiences consist of Russophones attuned to domestic narratives, cleaves closely to Kremlin positions. It also welcomes voices whose extreme opinions are unsuitable for airing on RT International. RT German appeals to segments of the ex-Communist East German population whose far-right, pro-Kremlin sentiments match the channel's alt-media profile and deployment of controversial bloggers. Its exclusively online presence and, until 2022, freedom from regulatory scrutiny gave it the latitude its French and UK peers lacked (Baumgartner, Hofner, and Muller 2021). RT's efforts to launch a German television channel in 2021 stalled following objections from the German authorities (RT 2021b); Russia's war on Ukraine killed the initiative, though RT German content remains available across various platforms and jurisdictions online.

Localization involves hiring staff with the political knowledge and journalistic agency to communicate to target audiences clustered at different ends of diverse ideological spectrums. For this reason the baton of RT America star presenter passed smoothly from Abby Martin, doyenne of the United States' Occupy movement, from which RT plucked her with the offer of a free platform for her anti-imperialist agenda, to a former Fox TV presenter who had cut her teeth in Tea Party circles. Martin's on-air protest at Russia's "act of imperial aggression" in Crimea in 2014, framed with reference to her "editorial freedom," exposed the risks of the channel's localization strategy.[5]

Simonyan, RT's editor in chief, occupies the summit of a hierarchy alongside Aleksei Nikolov, the less influential managing director.[6] Below is a branch including separate units for social media, independent content makers, online content, marketing, talk shows (commissioned personally by Simonyan), and documentaries. The fulcrum of this branch, and of the structure, is the head of News, who reports directly to Marketing and Public Relations and to Simonyan and who oversees the TV channels. The base of the structure (represented in Figure 2.1 below) includes the local channels, which, though subordinate to RT International, operated at a distance from Moscow until 2022 and which frequently cross-pollinate one another's news content.

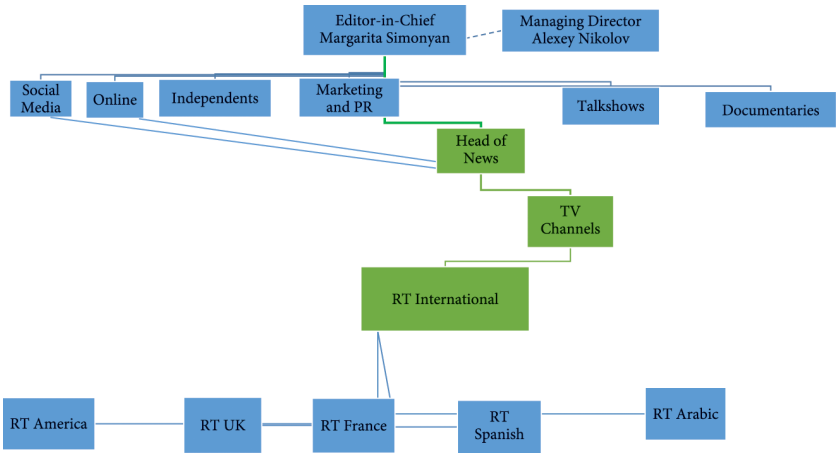

FIGURE 2.1. RT's Pre-2022 structure (information based on interview with RT presenter, April 5, 2020)

The local channels have their own newsrooms, and as with mainstream broadcasters, editorial meetings drive this operation. According to the ex-journalist who was our source (named A in our list of interviewees; see table 2.1), two of these take place daily, and within every channel the head of News determines reporting strategies and news agendas (note, however, that RT UK and RT America closed in 2022). Speaking before the full-scale Ukraine war, staff told of minimal interference from Moscow, except for stories in which critical Russian interests were involved. Even after the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, RT remained concerned about its professional reputation and about the requirements imposed by local jurisdictions. Contrary to crude portrayals of a unidimensional disinformation machine, RT's newsrooms employ their own fact-checkers, who can be prone to error owing to time pressures.[7] Yet key positions in each newsroom are occupied by Russian nationals who are accustomed to state media management techniques, in tune with Kremlin positions, and, like most Russian journalists, masters of self-censorship (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020).

The competing centrifugal and centripetal pulls illuminate a wider conundrum. Localization and the attendant diversity across RT outlets and platforms could reflect an entropic process in which coherent, uniform meanings, along with the controlling agency generating them, seep imperceptibly away from central RT headquarters (itself a level removed from the Kremlin). This risks fragmentation and political incoherence. Conversely, it might be a dissembling strategy intended to disguise the Kremlin's voice precisely so it can be heard, albeit in muted tones, in all contexts. Evaluating these competing explanations is tantamount to determining if RT is more mercurial mutant than subterranean predator.

Black Sheep of the Family?

The tensions afflicting RT affect all international broadcasters, who must maintain credibility among their target audiences in order to demonstrate to their state sponsors that they deserve funding. Yet unless they advance those states' interests, they lose purpose. The tensions are exposed in their respective mission statements.

The published mission statements of the BBC WS, Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Deutsche Welle (DW), and France 24 all emphasize journalistic values (accuracy, balance, pluralism, comprehensiveness, and professionalism).[8] VOA and DW also mention "telling the truth." These broadcasters highlight the democratic principles they endorse (liberal democracy, respect for human rights, and "sustaining civil society"). The BBC WS aims "to be the world's most trusted international news provider." RFE/RL claims to provide media in repressive countries with a model of independent journalism. Several stress their independence, citing legislation safeguarding them from government interference (VOA, DW).

With its "focus on contrasting viewpoints via news bulletins, reports, magazines, and debates," France 24 follows the pattern. Its embrace of cultural difference ("66 nationalities are represented among the group's employees"), however, indicates self-differentiation from what it assumes to be its more homogenous rivals.

Other Western international broadcasters are less inventive. VOA merely offers a "comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions"; DW communicates "German points of view and a European perspective"; RFE/RL is silent on the issue. In claiming to provide a "global" as well as an "international" perspective, BBC WS is alone in stressing that its viewpoint is "not based upon any national or commercial interests." With the most transparent mission, however, BBC WS is most exposed to contradiction. The global perspective conflicts with BBC WS's second key task of "bringing … the UK to the world." Its boast of lacking connections to British national interests overlooks its acknowledgment that its targets are jointly established by the BBC Trust (2006, 35) and the foreign secretary. The assertion that BBC coverage is free of market interests clashes with the priority "to ensure that its services … are tailored to audiences' needs" (BBC Trust 2006, 35).

The primary non-Western broadcaster offering an alternative to the MSM, Al Jazeera, includes a commitment to accuracy, objectivity, and professionalism, like its Western rivals.[9] Its values reflect populist, not liberal democratic, influences, however, expressed through slogans like "We aim to be the voice of the voiceless." There is no mention of Qatar (the sponsoring state) yet no assertion of freedom from government interference.

The mission statements of more overtly counterhegemonic outlets (RT, Iran's Press TV, and China's CGTN) do not promise comprehensive coverage, positioning themselves as alternatives to Western mainstream media—their key goal.[10] They commit to covering stories neglected by dominant news providers but decline to assert editorial independence from sponsoring states, although RT claims to be "an autonomous, non-profit organization publicly financed from the budget of the RF."

RT's and CGTN's mission statements lack clear political or journalistic values. Press TV invokes concepts categorizable as values-related ("building bridges of cultural understanding" and "encouraging human beings … to identify with one another"). Notably, unlike Al Jazeera, whose statement endorses "accuracy and objectivity and the

value of truth and professionalism," these broadcasters make no reference to democracy or objectivity. Like Al Jazeera and unlike Western rivals, RT, CGTN, and Press TV avoid lengthy mission statements. Several alternative outlets align with DW, VOA, and France 24 in acknowledging their soft power goals, however. RT admits that it aims to acquaint its audiences "with a Russian point of view." CGTN aims more ambiguously to cover "China and the world" yet "report the news from a global perspective."

Press TV belongs to a group of broadcasters whose name/acronym masks their state affiliation (RT, Al Jazeera, and CGTN but also the BBC WS, CNN, the majority Venezuela-financed channel Telesur, and RFE/RFL). The other group, whose members' names foreground their affiliation, includes France 24, Deutsche Welle, and Voice of America. The fact that the tendency to conceal state affiliation is shared by all counterhegemonic channels yet also includes traditional/mainstream outlets indicates that the tension between securing legitimacy through the coverage of events that target audiences will find credible and the onus of fulfilling state-mandated soft power missions affect all international broadcasters.

For RT there is at one level no contradiction, given Russia's conflict with its Western rivals. In fighting an information war for the Russian state, RT, Simonyan believes, behaves like BBC WS, whose claimed neutrality is hypocritical (Simonyan 2018). Indeed, the BBC WS has justified its own plea for increased funds by suggesting that it is "losing the information war" (Halliday 2014), displaying financial anxiety similar to that of RT. There is, though, a fundamental difference between maintaining that another state is conducting a hostile propagandistic campaign demanding a response and contending, like RT, that ideological conflict defines *all* news reporting. This difference was amplified when, with Simonyan's endorsement in December 2021, Russia converted ideological conflict into full-scale military invasion, expanding the aggression that had commenced in 2014.

Linked to Simonyan's defiant rhetoric is RT's tendency to mirror, yet subvert the meanings of, familiar Western media strategies. Thus, RT now has its own "Fake Check" tool designed to expose MSM instances of "fake news."[11] Like other alt-media outlets, far from overtly rejecting accuracy RT rhetorically embraces the homespun wisdom that facts do not lie. Without context, however, facts can distort the truth as effectively as lies. RT has shown itself to be adept in manipulating facts, but like other alt-media outlets, it is also guilty of the lesser crime of misconstruing the relationship between facts and meaning. In either case, simplistic condemnations of the broadcaster as a straightforward disinformation purveyor are counterproductive. Its operations have been far more changeable, contingent, and plugged into the logics of the wider media ecosystems in which it operates.

Notwithstanding Simonyan's defense of RT's news philosophy, she could not ignore Western regulators whose impartiality guidelines shape their own media theories. The resulting contortions forced on RT can be traced within individual language services but also across its various platforms. RT Russian, whose Russophone audience falls closest to the Kremlin zone of influence, echoes the state agendas of its domestic counterparts. Operating in a context in which hostility to the United States' perceived hegemonic intent is widespread, RT Arabic can afford greater partisanship than its sister channels. Constrained by followers exposed to mainstream media output and by strict broadcasting regulation environments, RT International, RT UK, and RT France tacked closer to the balanced approach characteristic of their rivals (a strategy severely strained by Kremlin

strictures on reporting on its invasion of Ukraine and one that proved futile in preventing the bans imposed on them); this applies less to their online output (though Facebook and Twitter began flagging RT posts as "Russian state supported" prior to the invasion of Ukraine before subsequently limiting access to them). RT German's web-based output and alt-media followership allows it to maintain a more consistently uncompromising antiestablishment pose, though its online activities are now significantly restricted.

In oscillating between its respective functions—(1) alt-media, counterhegemonic disruptor (a function eschewed by international broadcasters of democratic states); (2) traditional state "soft power" instrument promoting a positive image of Russia; (3) credible international broadcaster voice offering global news coverage—RT added a new layer to the contradictions that affect its rivals too. Rather than falling into neat categories, international broadcasters display complex Wittgensteinian "family resemblances" rendering precise comparison impossible (Wittgenstein 1953). These contradictions continue to be accented in RT's output, even when the invasion of Ukraine placed (3) under a particularly strong duress. Unlike mainstream international broadcasters that alternate between (2) and (3) only, RT also consciously veers toward (1). This is one reason why the Western branch of its own family demonized it as a "black sheep" before disowning it in 2022. The post-2008 European populist moment and the related interpenetration of alternative and mainstream, authoritarian and democratic ecosystems afforded RT the opportunity to reconcile the contradictions. Dramatic curtailments of its activities have impaired its capacity to fulfil functions (2) and (3) in Western media space, but they have not terminated those functions elsewhere, and RT continues to perform its "credible" news provider and "soft power" projector identities to new audiences with high levels of anti-Western sentiment. This is why RT France is expanding its activities in Africa (Dassonville 2022), RT International has opened an Africa hub in Johannesburg (Sguazzin 2022), and RT has established a new Balkan web service.

The View from Within (and Beyond)

RT journalists must negotiate the challenges we outline. Given that a large percentage are non-Russian, their tasks acquire added complexity. We conclude with an insight into how they have fared, based on interviews conducted with RT journalists, in the past and present (from within and beyond). Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused many of RT's foreign staff to resign, while others lost their jobs when RT cut its operations following a widespread loss of broadcasting rights. There is evidence that in some jurisdictions, however, ex-RT staff have infiltrated local outlets open to a pro-Kremlin reorientation of their content. One example is the French newspaper *Journal de Dimanche*, which acquired three prominent ex-RT France employees in keeping with its antiestablishment, right-wing editorial line (Suc and Turchi 2023).

The value of the insights gained from our interviews is, therefore, partly historical. Ours is not the first such ethnography. Staff interviews inform Alpert's (2014) book. Other than Peter Lavelle's admission regarding misjudgments in RT's early days, Alpert's interviews reveal two predictable attitudinal stances. First are the comments from ex-RT staff complaining that "Question More" does not apply to Russia. Second are the assertions by

senior RT journalists and junior reporters affirming the channel's public narratives on MSM hegemony.

Elswah and Howard's (2020) article on RT's "organizational behavior" draws on twenty-three interviews, but since twenty-one were with disgruntled former staff, they, too, corroborated the familiar argument that RT is an information war tool that cultivates extreme caution among its timid, inexperienced foreign staff. While accepting their findings, we reveal a complex picture in which the relationship between RT's employees and executives is more dynamic than the hierarchical model described by Elswah and Howard, whose account of a systematic RT policy of recruiting young, compliant staff capable of being manipulated is only partially true. Indeed, RT consistently secured prominent presenters for its flagship shows (Larry King, Ed Schultz, and Abby Martin in the United States; Alex Salmond and George Galloway in the United Kingdom; and Frédéric Taddeï in France). With Russia's incursion into Ukraine in 2014, it began suffering equally high-profile departures and on-air scandals, including Abby Martin's protest at Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the on-air resignation of news reader Liz Wahl (Hutchings 2019). The two trends are connected by RT's transactional relationship with its stars. Martin's Occupy credentials and Salmond's pro–Scottish independence stance clearly served RT's ideological purposes. Conversely, RT provided Martin and Salmond with platforms. Transactions are prone to collapse (as when Martin's antihegemonic sensibilities clashed with Russian imperialism). Even the extratight control the Kremlin applied to state broadcasters during its war on Ukraine failed to prevent scandals. This occurred, for example, when Anton Krasovsky, a prominent gay critic of Russia's anti-LGBTQ legislation yet a staunch Putin supporter who was hired in 2020 to lead RT's Russian-language output, called on air in October 2022 for Ukrainian children to be burned alive and drowned. Krasovsky was removed from his post and initially threatened with a criminal investigation (Roth 2022b).[12]

We interviewed ten staff members between 2018 and 2020 (see table 2.1; indicated by the letters *A*–*K*). These include two leading presenters, a senior executive, a TV news reporter, a senior member of RT's digital innovation team, and five employees at lower levels carrying out various duties, including program research.

In our analysis we anonymized quotes and recorded when the interview took place. The interviews show how aspects of RT's organizational culture illuminate our broader account of the broadcaster's evolving place within the global media landscape. While taking the views expressed seriously, we remained alert to biases at both ends of the spectrum (those of current staff reliant on RT for their livelihoods and those of disillusioned ex-employees), refusing to accept claims uncritically. We sought corroboration by following anthropological principles requiring researchers to combine emic (internal) and etic (external) experiences of their object of study to build a fuller picture of it. Our strategy addresses the central question "What is RT?" by attending to the interplay between several internal and external perspectives—that of the Kremlin, that of RT itself, that of its audiences, and that of its sternest critics (political and academic)—both overlaid upon and in conflict with one another. The precise configuration shifts contextually, but we eschew relativism, remaining committed to the idea of a verifiable truth located elusively at the intersection of multiple individual accounts of it.

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1 Leading RT presenter at time of interview; later a victim of RT's postinvasion job losses and now a frequent

	contributor to nonmainstream media outlets
B	eading RT presenter, at the point of leaving RT at time of interview
C	enior executive within RT's present operation
D	T TV news reporter now no longer with RT
E	
F	
G	Employees at lower levels carrying out various duties, including program research
H	
I	
J	
K	ighly placed member of RT's digital innovation team at the time of the interview and now no longer an RT employee

TABLE 2.1. Anonymized list of RT employees interviewed and their positions

The first theme to emerge was that employees viewed RT as a benign employer keen to treat its staff as its extended "family." Unsurprisingly, the senior executive (3) endorsed this claim, but so, too, did presenter A, who praised RT for recognizing her parental duties: "Having a network that appreciates the role of the family … is also a good business, because when I am there those four days, and when I am here in London for 2.5 weeks and they ask me to do these things, I have no problem … when the family needs me, I am allowed to be there" (November 7, 2019).[13]

Presenter A contrasted RT's support of female staff with the misogynism of her former US employer. There is a tension here between RT America's pitch to the Trump-supporting circles from which she emerged and the progressive (albeit idiosyncratic) feminist values endorsed by RT that has, however, not refrained from indulging in a Trumpesque mockery of feminist "wokeness." She was no exception; most RT employees likewise acknowledged that RT cared for its staff's well-being.

Presenter B told us how she was escorted on arrival in Moscow to elite stores to be bought the chic outfits required for her new role (May 4, 2020). Here RT's commitment to women's issues takes a conservative turn more in keeping with Fox News (Peck 2019); it celebrates the use of female glamour to ensnare (male) audiences, preferring its opinionated, short-skirted young anchors to their regimented BBC peers ground down by hypocritical impartiality rules. The new presenter came to RT with impressive credentials and did not hide her kid-glove treatment, but this sense of pampered privilege was widely shared, reflecting RT's beneficence toward its foreign employees.

Several younger interviewees expressed gratitude for the opportunity to ply their trade at levels that would take years to reach within mainstream broadcasting (E, H, July 6, 2020). This helps RT shape its staff into its preferred mold, though the policy is also motivated by the dearth of experienced, non-Russian alternatives. Our senior presenter saw as her legacy the induction of a generation of young journalists into their chosen profession (B, May 4, 2020). RT acknowledges the benefits of appointing minority ethnic staff, particularly those whose deployment to conflict regions reinforces the sense that RT keeps its ear to the ground and conveys the truths carried by local voices. Its appointment policies reflect both the reality that many of its Anglophone followers inhabit ex-British colonial space and an appreciation of how to exploit global anti-imperial sentiment. In the aftermath of RT's post-2022 tilt to non-Western audiences, this tendency has grown.

Similar thinking underlies the leeway granted foreign staff, though the scale of this freedom differs between star signings and entry-level reporters. Presenter A stressed that she, not Moscow, determined program content. Skeptics may observe that giving editorial

freedom to a Tea Party sympathizer was unproblematic for RT, whose US strategy centers on courting Trump supporters. The presenter noted that she regularly interviewed Democrats and progressives, however; while it skewed rightward, her show (discontinued when RT America closed in 2022) featured a diversity of opinion unthinkable for Russian domestic television. A complementary example is that of Sam Delaney, the alternative British comedian given his own show by RT UK. When it was pulled following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Delaney (2018) reported that he was "astounded by the freedom he was granted."

RT's transactional approach informs attitudes expressed by junior non-Russian employees. All felt that they played a modest role in shaping RT reporting but were aware that they were operating under constraints; even new entrees claimed that, without changing the line on major issues, they smuggled nuance into coverage of certain stories, rescuing RT from crude propagandizing: "My big … personal mission in the newsroom was to depropagandize anything that looked like propaganda.… You know … the whole attribution thing is kind of lost on them" (I, July 6, 2020). Our interviewees (including ex-employees) expressed neither shame nor cynicism, displaying pride in their achievements. As Presenter A commented: "I can say 'no' and it's gone, or I can say 'yes' and it's on.… It is a team effort. And on that team … we have an extreme libertarian and an extreme progressive. I made sure that my team is extremely diverse politically" (November 7, 2019).

Rather than see themselves as the tools of a pariah, they demonstrated strong identification with a global community of media professionals that extended well beyond RT. This sentiment was shared by the RT executive (3) whose regular participation in top international forums was central to her self-esteem; she took her own obligations there seriously, expecting others to return the compliment: "I try to give a very … balanced … view because anything beyond that … will not be taken as genuine. And I temper myself, and it's only after speaking at the Council of Europe, sleeping three hours, driving from France … that I open up" (November 7, 2019).

However absurd such pseudo-cosmopolitan posturing appears from without, we should not underestimate the significance of the clashes that arise when they encounter the imperatives of a beleaguered Russian state.

All our interviewees were aware of the controversies their choices involved, acknowledging that they worked for a notorious state broadcaster. They, predictably, justified themselves by observing that every broadcaster is biased and that Russia has "the right to put its position." RT's foreign staff imbibe its metanarrative about the honesty and transparency that distinguishes it from the BBC's and from CNN's insincere impartiality claims. They internalized the "Question More" principle, replicating the gist of RT's mission statement concerning its goal of challenging the MSM and telling the inconvenient stories that Western outlets overlook. The reporter (D) linked this to what they saw as RT's willingness to overcome the class prejudices of broadcasting stalwarts like the BBC and to extend opportunities to talented working-class reporters (November 6, 2020). Interviewees also appreciated RT's willingness to support journalists who present bold pitches. Several personalized the victimhood narrative.

Our interviewees framed their rejection of Western stereotypes of RT in ways that were sometimes unexpected. The reporter (D), who featured regularly in RT's television news output, reacted not only against the idea that RT belongs to the "post-truth" era but to the principle of post truth, citing his UK journalistic training and its emphasis on accuracy,

fairness, and the need to inform (November 6, 2020). This represents an intriguing effort to synthesize RT's ethos with that of its adversaries. It also reveals that the strains placed on RT by its need to toggle between three modes—patriotic information warrior, counterhegemonic disruptor, and credible news provider—were visible within individuals as well as across time.

RT's ability to integrate its foreign staff is limited. Its high-profile fallouts with stars are the tip of an iceberg of cognitive dissonance that surfaced with differing intensity throughout our interviews. Generally, the lower down the organizational hierarchy, the more acute the disorientation. A junior researcher commented that neither he nor his peers believed in their work and constantly joked that their behind-the-scenes conversations "would not go down well in Moscow" (H, March 17, 2020).

Few disputed that there were no-go areas that no amount of journalistic autonomy could circumvent. A few outspoken ex-staff condemned RT's crude mishandling of certain stories. Others highlighted the chasm between the foreign, Western-acculturated RT staff and their Russian peers and between the alienating behaviors of the top management echelons and local offices. A young ex-RT journalist condemned management's treatment of some colleagues: "I've seen more than a few junior broadcast journalists reduced to tears by being ripped apart very publicly in the newsroom and so "rule by fear" is also part of the management process" (I, July 6, 2020).

One highly placed interviewee complained about RT's "obsession with metrics." Rather than slipping into Kremlin propaganda bullhorn mode, RT, he claimed, behaves too much like market-driven Western tabloids (K, May 28, 2020). The example reveals how tensions reflecting RT's position at the nexus of neoliberal economics and post-Communist Russian politics permeated its organizational culture. Thus, as Alpert (2014) and Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody (2022) show, RT's eager embrace of and then partial retreat from conspiracy theories in the 2010s reflect its perception of market performance changes attributable to its declining credibility, rather than a shift in political strategy.

Sometimes, the culture clashes that RT's top-down organizational structure provoke among its foreign staff create resentment; the minimal access to senior executives grates with individuals used to more consultative management styles. A lack of career opportunities proved contentious. Although entrance-level pay is high, employees are disavowed of any expectation of progression. Despite gestures toward gender and race equality, some opined that RT enacts prejudice on both fronts (G, July 6, 2020).

Yet distance between foreign staff and Russian employers underpins the formers' role as cultural intermediaries, facilitating a form of double agency. This is evident in the social media engagement of RT's most controversial associates. Unlike their BBC counterparts, whose online activities must respect impartiality guidelines, they have relatively free rein on Twitter. An intriguing example is the personal Twitter account of Bryan MacDonald, an Irish journalist who, until 2022, wrote RT op-eds and was RT.com's head of the Russia desk (RobPulseNews 2014). He engaged prolifically in dialogue with Western public figures, criticizing them for "double standards" but also exposing his own un–RT-like truths about Russia: "I'm personally not a Putin supporter.… I'd rather see some leftist movement emerge with its primary focus on reducing the obscene inequality which is holding Russia back" (Soldo 2021).

MacDonald's posturing played on his postcolonial Irish disdain for the imperial haughtiness of his online foes. The problems this, and other aspects of his behavior, posed

for those wishing to determine conclusively if it is cynical deception or genuine intercultural mediation are precisely its point. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, MacDonald issued a tweet apologizing for his failure to predict it before terminating his association with RT.

RT's earlier strategy with respect to its foreign staff was pragmatic; there was negotiation and compromise, as well as mutual exploitation and hypocrisy. Our interviews revealed a more complex picture than that in widespread Western narratives condemning those who stoop to "sell their souls for a dime" to the Kremlin "devil" (Richter 2017a; Elswah and Howard 2020). These complex self-perceptions matter because they influence people's approach to their jobs.

We have argued that RT has consistently operated across three modes: those of a tool of Russia's *miagkaia sila*, a credible international news provider, and a counterhegemonic alt-media populist also needing to reconcile the political and commercial imperatives that accompany its dual function as a state mouthpiece and a competitive global broadcaster. Clear collaboration between RT and the Russian intelligence services in their clandestine influence campaigns happened only occasionally. The tripartite identity, which at times acquires this fourth dimension, particularly since 2022, plays out differently across RT's various services. At one end of the spectrum is RT France, which was (1) originally marketed as a regular French outlet operating in a local media environment and (2) subjected to unusually close scrutiny by the French authorities. Prior to 2022, RT France more often performed the "credible international news provider" aspect of the identity than other RT services, among which RT German was at the other end of the spectrum, overtly publicizing its alt-media status.

We showed that initially RT served as a traditional, openly Kremlin-aligned purveyor of Russian soft diplomacy while pointing to the definitional problems affecting the entire lexicon of international projection strategies.

We linked RT's second phase, when it adopted its "Question More" brand, to the 2008 financial crash, to the disruptive influence of social media, and also to Russia's perception that it had lost the battle for global information supremacy around the Russo-Georgian war and required a new influencing strategy. During this phase RT established itself as the first state broadcaster to exploit proliferating online horizontal networks of nonstate actors and embrace an alt-media populist identity. RT's primary, reputation-enhancing identity as an international broadcaster belies its poor performance as such, other than in non-Western arenas (a fact it has striven to hide), and it is on the newer digital platforms–where alt-media actors thrive—that it has enjoyed greater success.

RT's third development stage is linked to the inception of the Ukraine conflict in 2014 when it targeted its counterhegemonic stance more confrontationally at Western allegations of Russian aggression, reinflecting it with the "multipolar world" narrative that has been a thematic constant in its output and showing a greater propensity for practices bordering on, and occasionally straying into, outright disinformation (a trend limited to specific news contexts). This tactic receded once the annexation of Crimea was complete but intensified again in the context of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine, which, in bringing about RT's exclusion from Western media space, marked its rebirth as an actor of influence within a developing world newly receptive to narratives proclaiming the end of Western hegemony and pointed to RT's ability to internalize and exploit its pariah status. In this fourth phase, RT characteristically capitalizes on geopolitical dramas within which Russia

is a bit player. Importantly, however, these narratives are enacted with significant variation (with RT Russian cleaving more closely to domestic outlets than its European counterparts).

Indeed, the centripetal/centrifugal axis revealed by comparisons across RT's language operations emerged as a key determinant of tensions in the broadcaster's organizational structures and institutional culture. These tensions, reflected in the conflicting motivations and outlooks of its staff (and in the transactional relationships between Russian management personnel, non-Russian presenters, junior reporters, and researchers) intersect with those pitting Russian state imperatives against neoliberal outsourcing logics.

The picture of a multifaceted, contradictory organization sets the tone for our book. But in generating meaning from complexity, we must seek unity amid fragmentation. One unifying approach is the information warfare narrative, with its Cold War antecedent, means of uniting right-wing hawks with residual hostility to a Russian threat, and progressive doves for whom Putin represents the antithesis of cherished liberal values. In this scenario any break in the pattern or minor bifurcation is a meaningless distraction from the main story: that of RT as a single-purpose, passive tool of Kremlin malfeasance. As we will argue, the fact that Russia's war on Ukraine bolstered post-factum accounts portraying RT's exposure as a categorical disinformation actor—the destiny awaiting it from the moment it was launched—makes it imperative to interrogate such teleological certainties.

A related factor is the contradiction revealed in the appeal to Western democracies of the very conspiratorialism they attribute to malign Russian actors. There is an irony in liberals undermining their belief in an open-ended world by advancing far-fetched teleological conspiracy narratives in which the Kremlin hatches elaborate sleeper agent plots, the most prominent of which supposedly resulted in Trump's ascendancy to the US presidency; it has since transpired that Trumpism is not only homegrown but long predates, and will outlive, Trump (see Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). More ironic is the Kremlin's echoing of such paranoid fears in its Russophobia obsession. In sharing attributes of grand metaconspiracies, Russophobia and Russia's information war confirm Borenstein's (2019) suggestion that we recognize a universal "conspiratorial mode" rather than confining conspiracy theories to fringe groups and rogue states. As Chernobrov and Briant (2022) argue, the mutual obsession with hostile propaganda reflects not only a mirroring dynamic but also each society's securitization process, as diverse societal issues are increasingly constructed as security related (Eroukhmanoff 2018). The fact that securitization is inflected by globalization brings us full circle, however. Critiques of narratives driven by Manichean certainty are themselves liable to generate powerful teleologies; antinarratives are still narratives.

In eschewing information war paradigms, we advance our own alternative. This positions RT among populist actors operating close to democracy's fracturing core, a strategy that required adaptation but not abandonment following the events of 2022. We view RT as a product of advanced mediatization prone not merely to harnessing populist communication logics from without but to internalizing them within its organizational identity and journalistic practices, with consequences both helpful for and detrimental to its mission. Answering the "What is RT?" question thus entails flirting with in theory/in practice distinctions. It also creates a conundrum. For our own emphasis on complexity and disorder must be articulated within a hermeneutic arc capable of reimposing order and

yielding coherent meaning.

We must evaluate the trade-offs the paradox demands at the end of the path we now embark upon, beginning with the anchor of RT's multiplatform operation: its television news output.

3

CURATION, INSINUATION, AND DELEGATION ON RT INTERNATIONAL NEWS BROADCASTS

RT's broadcasting activities raised concerns from its creation, well before the shift from a system of "normal politics" to one of "manual control" that followed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Treisman 2018). This chapter examines the normal politics of the prewar situation as typified in RT International's daily broadcast news coverage. It underscores the significance to the evolution of this content of RT's creation under conditions of comprehensive mediatization within which political activity is carefully attuned to media logics (Strömbäck 2008). RT has always consciously interrogated its positionality within this mediatized context: it has adapted to and gamed successive online circulatory trends (Yablokov 2015; Orttung and Nelson 2019; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2022), experimented with immersive media projects (Crilley, Gillespie, and Willis 2020; Hutchings 2020b), and defied genre expectations in transposing content across platforms. RT has also habitually interrogated the media-politics nexus, not least by centering its own reporting on *other outlets' reporting* of key events (Birge and Chatterje-Doody 2021; Tolz et al. 2021).

RT's self-conscious engagement with mediatization reflects its development within a global media system in which processes of circulation, interaction, and marketization all help to deprioritize the production of rational or objective news for broad audiences in favor of affective, identity-based appeals that will be "felt" by self-selecting groups (Peck 2019). This can help explain the variations in the function and reception of RT's different language services, tailored for different sections of the global media market, as well as of RT International across the geographical contexts in which it is consumed.

Within Western democracies, affective media content is most closely associated with hyperpartisan, "alternative" outlets not constrained by "the ethical standards and normative ideals they find wanting in the mainstream media" and into whose wider ecosystem RT has taken pains to insert itself (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019, 1233). RT's audience in the United Kingdom, for instance, often contrasted the network (implicitly or explicitly) with the BBC. Yet, as a public service broadcaster, the BBC is expected by its regulator, Ofcom, to provide "high-quality, creative content that is distinctive across all its output and services; and that includes news and current affairs across all platforms" (Ofcom 2019). While it may fall short of the ideal, the BBC's benchmark for judgment is high. For RT the bar is much lower. Even Ofcom (2018) accepted RT's primary purpose as presenting a Russian perspective. To meet its own ideals, then, RT need only challenge mainstream political and media institutions. It has done this by adapting the context-dependent flexible positioning strategies that far-right alternative news outlets use within this space to establish their authority to speak against the mainstream media (MSM), whether the "insider" position of journalists who know how the industry should work, the "expert" position backed up with apparently overlooked facts and sources, the "victim" position of having been sidelined by mainstream industry counterparts, the "citizen" position of representing the people, or the "activist" position of directly confronting and challenging the mainstream (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019, 1232–33). In so doing, RT's alternative media (alt-media) status can speak to Western audiences for whom an obviously state-led broadcaster might otherwise hold little appeal.

In a broader global context, however, such a positioning is not nonmainstream at all: the Arabic and Latin American media spaces are not similarly governed by conventions of balancing different opinions nor of interrogating official pronouncements. This goes some way to explaining the strong positions of RT Arabic and RT Spanish in their respective market contexts. It also indicates why Western-centric accounts of RT's activities have struggled to account for the ongoing appeal of RT International in the wider world, even following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For just as RT has optimized different outputs for the prevailing circulation logics of different languages and platforms, it has actively experimented and learned from other global media organizations. Its identities as Russia's voice or an alternative source have been ostensibly less significant across much of the world where its identity as a valid international broadcaster fits more closely with local media norms.

Yet even though RT's various platform and language services have been developed to fit the ideational preferences of their demographic and geographic target constituencies, RT International has consistently functioned as the flagship news coverage service with global reach, around which Simonyan's claims to equivalence with other international broadcasters were based. Based on an analysis of two years' worth (May 2017–May 2019) of RT International's daily news broadcasts, this chapter serves as a baseline for the detailed case studies presented in subsequent chapters. It demonstrates how RT News wove a strategically specific populist worldview from its alt-media positions, reimagining the "people" transnationally and occluding its own link to a foreign power. At the core of this confidence trick is RT's work as an experimental identity creator, applying populist communication logics to construct and reconstruct its own and its audiences' identities, implying that their interests coincide. This increases the affective resonance of its narratives for the audiences whom it appears directly to represent. Contrasting "the people" vertically

with "the elites" at home and horizontally with "outsiders" from overseas, RT performatively distances itself from its state sponsor, situating itself as a neutral arbiter of preexisting social conflicts between dominant political and media actors and a disenfranchised transnational people. As one RT presenter put it: "I get to ask all the questions that the American people want answered about their own country because I care about this country and I don't work for a corporate-owned media organization" (cited in Ioffe 2010).

Here we confirm previous studies' findings of RT International's preoccupation with political dysfunction in Western countries and with issues of immigration, Islam, and terrorism (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2018, 70), which—as with Russian domestic television (Hutchings and Tolz 2018; Popovych et al. 2018)—RT consistently frames as interrelated ills (Smirnova 2016; Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019b). In setting out the most extensive content analysis of RT broadcasts to date, the original evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates how RT's self-conscious engagement with mediatization processes during times of normal politics has influenced its news making practices and interactions within the wider global mediasphere, leading it to self-consciously occupy the role of a global populist actor. Firefighting over Russia's international reputation, RT has long attempted to balance its identity as an international broadcaster as valid as any other, with its alt-media status—and we show how it has borrowed techniques from the wider alt-media space to do so. RT amends its claims to authority when discussing different kinds of news items and demonstrates geographical specificities in the objects of its critique, yet through all of this, it repeats standard framings and formulations that transcend these differences.

This analysis demonstrates how RT can read almost any topic through the lens of identity. While ostensibly deriding "identity politics," RT's reporting nonetheless constructs the identity of a transnational people to whom it directs its content, of the geopolitical regions on which it reports, and of the network's own tripartite identity. Noting the remarkable consistency with which RT presents the identities of its favored international actors—regardless of what substance is being reported—the chapter argues that RT International News broadcasts are not focused primarily on reporting (alternative perspectives on) the news. Rather, their central concern is the construction of these multilevel identities, for which the news serves as vessel.

Data Collection and Methodology

In its heyday, RT described itself as "a global, round-the-clock news network" (RT, n.d.), and despite the variety in its services and outputs, old-fashioned news broadcasting has always been central to the organization's claims to be an international news network. Indeed, throughout the analysis period news broadcasts took up the majority of RT International's airtime: half-hour bulletins appeared every hour on the hour. RT UK and RT America followed the same pattern for the greatest portion of the day, with some differentiated evening broadcasts of news (UK) and news-related (US) programming, produced from their (now abandoned) London and Washington, DC, studios. There were minor differences in the scheduling of ancillary programming around these news broadcasts across the three channels, with RT America displaying the greatest variety. RT

International's 3 p.m. (Moscow) news broadcasts were recorded daily for twenty-four months between May 15, 2017, and May 14, 2019. On the few occasions when recording failed or where scheduling differed, an equivalent afternoon broadcast was downloaded from the RT website. This sample therefore gives a good overview of what RT broadcast news looked like over a protracted period of normal politics before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Our analysis began with a pilot study of one month's worth of broadcasts, which were coded to produce a database of records including the number, titles, running orders, and lengths of each news story; their geographical focus (and whether this was domestic or international news); and a short free-text description of content. The main themes of all stories were coded according to a preset scheme drafted on a first survey of RT news content, refined in collaboration with a team of topic experts, and set out in a code book. Primary and secondary themes were recorded for each story. Binary categories were included for each record to note the presence or absence of conspiracy theories, sarcasm or satire, and President Putin. A final (free text, optional) category was included to note whether the use of any particular frames emerged from the data.

Intercoder reliability testing was conducted on one week's worth of recordings (i.e., 25 percent of the pilot study). Two researchers independently coded the broadcasts as per the codebook, noting areas where the code book or data collection categories could be improved. The intercoder reliability testing indicated very high reliability: it produced almost exactly duplicate results for numbers, running orders, timing, and lengths of stories. Coding of primary and secondary topics showed 67 percent convergence, increasing to almost 100 percent when removing the distinction between primary and secondary (i.e., the two researchers classified almost all records with the same categories but not necessarily in the same order). "Domestic" and "international" news was coded identically. Where recorded, dominant frames were equivalent.

The coding scheme and method were judged reliable and fit for purpose, with one major refinement: not ranking as primary and secondary the (up to) two topic categories per record. Minor refinements consisted of adding three new topic categories, a free text category for the name/affiliation of external commentators/experts, and two binary categories recording discussions of (1) foreign media coverage and (2) RT or its journalists.

Due to the time constraints of manually coding such detailed information for all records, the comprehensive study was conducted on alternate months' worth of daily recordings. RT's weekend news roundup, the *Weekly*, was excluded as it consolidates (i.e., duplicates) the preceding week's coverage. The final data set comprised 1,932 story records. Several significant media events punctuated the study: the 2018 Salisbury poisonings in the United Kingdom, Russia's hosting of the 2018 World Cup, some key Brexit milestones, and multiple terrorist attacks. Some of these significantly shifted the focus of the news coverage over short periods, so additional coding categories were added for the World Cup and the Salisbury poisonings to mitigate this (Brexit and terrorism were already included). When these global media events disrupted the aggregate picture presented on RT News, we noted such in the analysis below. The key benefit of their inclusion within the wider analysis period is the help they provide in highlighting the contrasts between RT's normal politics reporting and its crisis state reporting, which is explored via case studies in subsequent chapters.

The analysis of RT International's broadcast news reporting of normal politics shows

how RT took its cue from alternative right-wing media, establishing its authority to speak variously as insider, expert, victim, citizen, or activist (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019). It redefined a transnational people whose interests it supposedly represented and employed informal communication practices, humor, and sarcasm as part of a performative fight back against Western MSM values. It mattered little that RT's approach ignored the ethical and normative standards expected of such media: its audiences were intended to measure it against "different ideals and rules" (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019, 1233). Fitting with how authoritarian regimes cultivate affective appeal and allegiance through the use of adaptive ideational-identarian narratives (Kneuer 2017), RT privileged the construction of favored identities above the alternative reporting of news. RT's curation, insinuation, and delegation of "normal politics" coverage combined MSM styling with right-wing alt-media content conventions (Frischlich, Klapproth, and Brinkschulte 2020), but even while ostensibly reporting in the interests of a strategically defined "people" rather than of a hostile state, its privileged identities reinforced a Kremlin-friendly line.

Curation

The typical RT News broadcast contains around twenty-five minutes of content punctuated by a ninety-second commercial break. The number of stories per broadcast ranges from 1 (infrequently, rolling coverage of notable events) to 11, but the typical (mode) number is 6. Their focus bears out RT's documented shift away from soft power broadcasting: only 105 (5 percent) of stories covered Russian domestic affairs, though those were the items especially likely to cover promotional media events.

The coding of stories by topic was not mutually exclusive, with one or two topics recorded as appropriate. With 92 percent of stories (94 percent of airtime; n = 1,781) internationally focused rather than domestic, RT's general orientation was comparable to international broadcasters like BBC World News (85 percent of stories; Dencik 2013, 130) and Al Jazeera (100 percent of stories; Figenschou 2010, 91). Only around an eighth (231 stories; 12 percent of total) of RT's international stories centered on Russia's activities, with the rest including general international matters as well as the internal politics (or international relations) of other states.

Curation of Topics

As illustrated in table 3.1, RT's dominant topic (characterizing 345 stories, or 18 percent) was formal international relations—coverage of politicians' activities or statements or bilateral meetings. Generally, RT established itself as a journalistic "insider" with as much authority as any other to report these activities professionally. This content was supported by three core topics, each characterizing around two hundred stories (10 percent): terrorism, military operations, and protest and social violence. This subset of themes was subject to important geographical curation.

Eight frequently recurring topics supported these themes, each characterizing 5–10 percent of stories: elections and democracy, foreign media, political and social institutions,

meddling, media and technology, humanitarian issues, migration, and the economy/trade. The final tier of supporting topics, each characterizing 1–5 percent of stories, consisted of crime, light interest, military might, social media trends, popular culture, Brexit, the Salisbury poisonings, Russophobia, political correctness, the 2018 World Cup, multiculturalism, disasters, and social commentary.

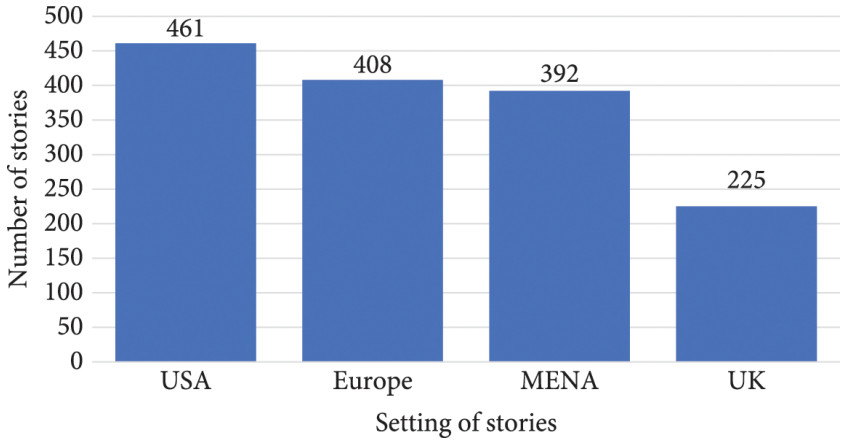

FIGURE 3.1. Top four geographical settings of RT News international stories

By contrast, RT's preoccupation with the United States was clear, accounting for over a quarter (26 percent) of international stories. These stories incorporated reporting of formal international relations (including stories featuring United States-Russia relations), as well as domestic stories portraying the United States negatively. Many concentrated on (disputing) the election meddling saga, (criticizing) the US MSM, and (undermining) the operations of the prevailing political and social institutions. In this, RT echoed the practices of the South American–funded broadcaster Telesur, which foregrounds negative portrayals of the United States (as well as positive portrayals of its state sponsors, Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua) (Painter 2008, 64).

The coherence of RT's US-critical content was bolstered via explicit engagement with mediatization and its effects. Stories interrogated the (social) media activities of political figures; questioned the interrelationship between the MSM, major social networks, and political elites; and discussed the implications that both might have on democratic institutions and practices. RT set up a vertical dichotomy between a hypocritical, corrupt political-media establishment and the ordinary people it disadvantaged, turning the ethical and normative aspirations of Western MSM on their heads. In RT's worldview, mediatization renders the Western MSM a cog within the mechanics of the political world it is supposed to represent. This fatally undermines the MSM's authority, leaving only RT—set up to challenge this very state of affairs—with any credibility.

The coverage of the other main international locations displayed instructive topical differentiation. Although formal international relations were always a top theme, the top five varied by location. In Europe they included protests and social violence (especially the French Yellow Vest movement), migration (framed as a crisis), and elections/democracy—particularly the rise of far-right and populist parties across Europe. The horizontal and vertical manifestations of populist logic identified by Rogers Brubaker (2017, 362–65) were both in evidence on RT International. Some stories articulated vertical conflict between the ordinary people protesting and the corrupt elite trampling their democratic rights. This was often the case in coverage of the Yellow Vests, which frequently foregrounded vox populi

with protesters on the ground and highlighted chaos and injustice in their relationship with the authorities and the figurehead of Macron in particular. Other stories articulated horizontal dichotomies—as in migration coverage that set up non-European Others as threats to ordinary people's way of life across Europe. Terrorism stories followed some way behind, including both breaking news and reporting of European states' antiterrorism operations and movements.

The MENA coverage was dominated by stories about military operations (Syria), terrorism (Syria; Afghanistan), and humanitarian concerns (Syria; Afghanistan; Yemen). Protest and social violence followed further behind. For this region the core dichotomy was simultaneously horizontal and vertical—between ordinary people in MENA and the hypocritical, corrupt overseas elites who have destabilized their societies with militarism and incompetence.

The two most significant themes in UK coverage were Brexit and the Salisbury poisonings. After these followed foreign MSM, formal international relations, an equal number of stories on political and social institutions, and alleged Russophobia. This latter category was a stock framing for stories critical or questioning of Russian foreign policy. For example, instead of substantively addressing allegations that Russia meddled in Brexit or committed the Salisbury poisonings, RT covered them as examples of cyclical Russophobia.

RT often took the "expert" position in these stories, hinting at previously overlooked information that could more accurately portray events, thus implicitly challenging mainstream or hegemonic accounts. At other times RT positioned itself as "activist," outlining multiple reasons that mainstream accounts should not be trusted.

Other areas of the globe received substantially less attention. Coverage focused on Russia was minimal, and its main topics (included in table 3.2 for comparison) were overwhelmingly derived from prompts that strategically covered media events. Nonetheless, Russia often appeared in the background of international news, ostensibly concerned with other places and powers but in a formulaic way that used repeated frames to make broader insinuations about global politics.

[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]

subsequent strategy was to reduce coverage of this tricky-to-navigate topic. This was reflected in the analysis period, with only twenty-one stories (1 percent) covering Ukraine (including Crimea). Nonetheless, these items replicated the Kremlin's favored themes as per Russian domestic TV, which portrayed Ukraine as an illiberal state with suspicious Westward ties and an inherently Russophobic outlook. Stories included allegations of press unfreedom or abuse of journalists (May 16, 2017; May 16, 2018–May 18, 2018; May 30, 2018–May 31, 2018; November 2, 2018); claims of Ukrainian militarism, either about US arms acquisitions, far-right training camps, or Ukrainian conduct in Donbas (January 3, 2018; July 12, 2018; November 4, 2018; March 25, 2019); the November 2018 Russo-Ukrainian Kerch standoff (November 26, 2018–November 28, 2018), and Ukraine's subsequent entry ban on fighting-age Russian men (November 30, 2018). RT's documentary wing covered similar ground over the same period, including a proseparatist account of the war in Donbas and an exposé of Ukraine's far-right military training camps.

RT's curation by geographical focus did not result in the expanded representation of the Global South observed on Al Jazeera (Figenschou 2010). Its coverage privileged the Euro-Atlantic and MENA regions but favored certain kinds of stories from each of those areas and appropriated techniques of hyperpartisan alt-media to establish its position not as an arm of the Russian state but as a legitimate commentator. At times RT positioned itself as the "insider" that knows how journalism should work; at others as the "victim" that has been stigmatized and excluded for its uncomfortable truths. Sometimes RT took on the guise of the "citizen" defending people's interests; at others the "activist" exposing institutional corruption and hypocrisy. In all cases RT constructed its identity for populist appeal, as the representative of a transnational people threatened by a Western-led global political and media elite—an objective outsider removed from the corrupt institutional practices it challenged. RT's self-conscious engagement with mediatization processes was one route to undermining mainstream accounts, with RT itself—and its position vis-à-vis other international actors—as the main subject under discussion in forty-two stories (2 percent).

Curation by Story Prompt

Despite RT's self-branding as an international news network responding to an ever-changing news cycle, only 4 percent of its stories were "breaking news" reports of new or ongoing developments. The remaining 96 percent required more overt decisions as to what constituted a worthy topic of inclusion. As well as its interrelated curation by geography and topic, RT showed a clear preference for five general story prompts: MSM coverage of global developments; criticisms of, or clashes between, establishment institutions; statements from Russian officials; scandals or social divisions; and preplanned media events. These prompts ensured that a significant proportion of stories highlighted inadequacies and clashes within dominant media, political and social institutions, or foregrounded Russian official perspectives and achievements.

In this vein, many stories engaged explicitly with mediatization and its consequences. RT often framed its reporting around media coverage of global developments, rather than around the developments themselves. In a practice reminiscent of Russian domestic state television, RT often aired montages of foreign press coverage and politicians' statements,

which combined the most extreme rhetorical examples and perspectives as if they were dominant mainstream positions. Despite its own emergence as an actor deeply enmeshed in mediatization processes, RT frequently engaged in the self-conscious deconstruction of mediatization, interrogating the interrelationship of political and media figures and the platforms on which they expressed their sentiments, as well as questioning the implications of this for democracy. Most importantly, RT used these segments to convey a narrative of a self-perpetuating political and media hysteria that was more significant than any substantive topic being discussed. Such stories allowed RT both to put forward a populist interpretation of political relations and to cast itself as a neutral outsider that could break through this corrupted media ecosystem.

The release of critical reports by auditing bodies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or whistleblowers was often used to prompt stories narrating clashes or criticisms of establishment institutions—especially in "the West." RT frequently bolstered these stories with contextual packages focusing on well-known historical examples of institutional corruption or failure. The specific news being reported would often end up as a relatively minor component within a narrative of the broader untrustworthiness of the institution being critiqued or the political system that it came from.

Stories prompted by instances of social division or scandal often began with dispassionate reports of local clashes insufficiently newsworthy for most mainstream international broadcasters—for example, a debate in a small European town about halal school meals. The specific story would then be used as a segue into the general discussion and analysis of RT's favored themes of migration and political correctness, which would imply great significance of an objectively minor prompt. In this practice RT took its cue from right-wing alt-media, which often build stylistic bridges toward the mainstream while simultaneously co-orienting their substantive content toward other right-wing alternative sources (Frischlich et al. 2020).

Russian politicians' statements or claims were another key story prompt, supposedly fitting the brief of a Russian perspective on world affairs. Featured statements were often responses to concrete political developments or allegations. This helped RT to claim neutrality in two ways: first, these statements appeared as responses to a relevant news agenda, rather than the privileging of Russian elites. Second, RT merely reported, rather than endorsed, the politicians' claims. Nonetheless, this resulted in Kremlin talking points implicitly shaping RT's coverage because they were introduced as the default framing of particular events, in response to which other perspectives were set up.

The final recurrent prompt for RT stories was the preplanned media event. These made up a relatively small proportion of RT's coverage overall but were the leading prompt in the Russian domestic news category (applying to 30 percent of domestic stories). They included coverage related to Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup and to its participation in or hosting of military exercises and spectacles. Both were useful examples for projecting a positive image of Russia. The World Cup of June–July was premediated, with program trailers incorporated into news broadcasts from May onward. Throughout July the tournament received extended special coverage on RT News, which often included extended excerpts from soft programming fronted by renowned international pundits. Focused on match analysis, venue/location tours, and cultural snapshots, this content more closely resembled the traditional expectations of soft power broadcasting than any other RT content and was positively received by football fans (Crilley, Gillespie, Kazakov, and

Willis 2022).

RT's "military might" coverage—essentially, the showcasing of Russian military hardware and training exercises—coincided with military spectacles like the MAKS airshow of July 2017 and the Vostok military exercises of September 2018. Both were the subject of repeated puff pieces: extended footage of military hardware in action was overlaid with rock music in the style of an action-movie montage. These packages gave a highly flattering picture of Russia's actual combat readiness, and as Ramsay and Robertshaw (2018) have previously noted, time-pressed UK tabloid journalists have been known to lift claims about Russian military developments directly from RT. As Russia's patchy operational performance following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine shows, however, the glamorous representations of Russian military might on-screen do not necessarily reflect Russian forces' real-world professionalism and material capacity.

All broadcasters have internal priorities for what constitutes newsworthiness. In the case of RT, its reliance on story prompts from the five categories above ensured that its news highlighted inadequacies and clashes within dominant Western media and political and social institutions or foregrounded Russian official perspectives and achievements.

Just as promotional stories about Russian sporting and military prowess were used to privilege Russian perspectives and achievements, negative portrayals of Russia were also used strategically. Rounding out the top five categories in domestic stories (beyond the World Cup and military might) were crime (13 percent), disasters (10 percent), and light interest (9 percent). The crime and disaster stories included critical coverage of the Russian penal system and the inattention to public safety that resulted in mass deaths from a mall fire in Kemerovo in March 2018. RT's coverage can be partly seen as a pragmatic response to the headlines such stories made around the world.

Despite being openly critical of the Russian institutional context, these stories were reported from a human-interest perspective: populist communication logics were applied to emphasize how the people responded to institutional injustices. As Litvinenko and Toepfl (2019) point out, even authoritarian regimes can tolerate criticism if it is directed toward specific policies or local elites rather than the center. Indeed, deflection of criticisms away from the center (and thus their effective neutralization) is a preferred outcome for authoritarian regimes. This is precisely what happened when RT simultaneously reported criticisms of local authorities and displayed its neutrality. The central administration in the Kremlin, however, was never implicated. Furthermore, these critical portrayals of Russia together describe only 23 percent of the already small Russian domestic news category. The small volume of domestic news on RT International means that RT thus exhibits neutrality and criticality while covering negative stories about Russia in fewer than 1.5 percent of its total stories.

In contrast to RT's self-representation as a counterhegemonic provider covering sidelined stories, it focuses on areas similar to mainstream international broadcasters but frames them around a curated set of topics that foregrounds institutional conflict or Russian perspectives and achievements. In covering all these stories, RT promotes and foregrounds confrontation between elites and people, hegemons and challengers while attempting to situate RT as a mere reporter of these conflicts. Ultimately, RT operates more to construct these identities than to report news.

Insinuation

Russia's domestic news coverage often includes explicit and deliberate false claims. By contrast, RT's "alternative" perspectives at times of normal politics tend to appear as incremental insinuations rather than fully formed (and, crucially, regulatable) allegations. These insinuations are achieved through the repeated use of standard frames for international actors, the selective setting of context, and the use of informal communicative practices that performatively delegate the act of drawing conclusions to the audience.

Insinuation Using Repeated Frames

We have seen in table 3.2 how stories about different geographical regions foregrounded starkly contrasting topics. Yet diverse topics across regions were often underpinned by the repetition of standard frames for the international actors involved in them. For example, in the most common category of story on RT News—formal international relations of the United States—the frame of US political hypocrisy was frequently applied, regardless of the precise topic of the story.

A similar pattern was evident in stories about the MENA region, where the dominant topics were military operations, terrorism, and humanitarian concerns. In all three cases, contextual information implicated US foreign policies in the instability and human suffering across the MENA region. The coverage was largely sympathetic to the ordinary people of the area who have suffered due to the incompetent elite of the hypocritical United States. In contrast to this standard framing of the United States, Russia appeared as a consistent background presence. Its actions were framed in terms of legality, predictability, and competence. This was notable in stories reporting the Syrian war, which formulaically used some variant of the stock phrase "Syrian government forces, supported by Russian air strikes." Russia's background activities were thus always insinuated to be legitimate actions taken to support its partners in cleaning up the United States' mess (see also Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020).

These standard frames were applied across the various international stories for which Russia appeared as a background presence and went some way to counterbalance the scant representation of Russia through domestically focused stories (6 percent of total). For instance, Russia often appeared in the background of US stories, characterized as a sober diplomatic counterpart within a conflictual US-Russia relationship. Sometimes this reflected a cookie-cutter approach to framing news (a calm Russia reacting to hysterical US meddling allegations, for example). At other times, editorial decisions expanded stories to encompass preferred frames. Thus, items ostensibly about (the inadequacies of) American democratic processes would often redirect to charges of hypocrisy over US allegations against Russia.

Though the primary topic in EU coverage was protest and social violence, its other prominent topics (including migration and terrorism) overlapped with those of MENA. Unlike the compassionate framing in MENA, however, EU stories overwhelmingly adopted the frame of a terminally divided and corrupt Europe. The same can be said of the coverage of Brexit in the United Kingdom. Conflictual portrayals of UK-EU relations have long been an MSM norm since official summits and elite party conflicts are more engaging than

predictable "business as usual" (Berry 2021). Brexit reporting in turn has emphasized general dissatisfaction with the European project and diplomatic clashes. RT, however, extended this logic. Its coverage of the EU, the United Kingdom and Brexit all foregrounded large-scale public dissatisfaction with official institutions and their apparent inability to secure the people's will. Russia only appeared in the background, again as a sober and measured international presence, unwilling to be carried away by speculation.

In framing the United Kingdom and the EU in this way, RT set up conflict on a vertical axis between allied political and media elites and a public being denied their will. It also articulated conflict horizontally, citing the "outsiders" willing to use the moral decline of the United Kingdom and EU to undermine their culture. Adapting its positionality from right-wing alt-media, RT cast itself as an "activist" allying with the transnational coalition of commonsensical ordinary people and trustworthy critical thinkers supposedly brave enough to challenge the mainstream using its platform. In a mediatized context in which mainstream broadcasters are sullied by association with incumbent political power, RT—like other alt-media outlets—presents itself as an independent voice of reason, serving the interests of a transnational "people" rather than the Russian state.

RT often implicitly referenced the inherent contradictions and inevitable decline of Western power. One recurrent theme was the idea of political correctness gone mad. Progressives were painted as bent upon the destruction of traditional symbols and values and hostile to the common sense of the people. Such stories set RT within the right-wing alt-media space, from which many talking points and invited commentators were drawn. Examples of such stories problematized gender- and transinclusive initiatives (November 14, 2017; January 12, 2018; March 5, 2018) and insinuated that antiracist movements have financial motives (September 27, 2017) or manufacture offense (September 22, 2017; January 16, 2018; January 3, 2019). For all such items, the issue was less about the specific stories under discussion than about the supposed truths that such stories revealed about a fundamentally corrupt, divided, and directionless Western social and political establishment.

Insinuation through Context Setting

One of journalists' key editorial responsibilities is to provide contextual information that makes news stories intelligible to their audiences. On RT, contextual claims routinely set up some of the network's favored insinuations. If we return to the theme of US hypocrisy, for instance, the incompetence or nefarious activities of foreign intelligence services like the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Central Intelligence Agency were a standard frame in stories that featured them, as with questions over how a suspected extremist received a US visa (March 7, 2018) or of activists' claims of agency brutality (May 17, 2018). When the agencies' activities were more central to the story under discussion, the selective representation of prior context served to directly undermine their accounts. In RT's reporting of the case of Julian Assange, for instance, presenters and commentators alike called into question the CIA's fitness to accuse or detain Assange, citing the agency's previous use of "smash and grab" practices, extraordinary rendition, and other human rights infringements (February 19, 2017; May 20, 2017).

At other times the ordering of stories served to make insinuations. For instance, on May

28, 2018, RT reported on "Border Escalation: Reports—13 Palestinians Wounded as Israel Raids Refugee Camp." RT had extensively covered the rapidly escalating violence over the Gaza March of Return, and this story critically discussed the decision of the Israeli Defence Forces to search for suspects in an officer killing within a refugee camp. A follow-on story subsequently aired, titled "Cash Backlash: UK Arms Sales to Israel Peak as Britain Calls to End Violence." It raised valid criticisms of the hypocrisy of states that condemn Israel's use of live ammunition on protesters while persistently supplying Israel with weapons. Nonetheless, RT's linking of the stories together demonstrates how today's news can always be used to reiterate favored identities for international actors while also insinuating a broad international web of corruption and intrigue that does not necessarily have to be articulated in full.

Insinuation via Informal Communicative Practices

Public service broadcasters tend to prioritize "harder" international political news compared to commercial broadcasters, while commercial outlets across various platforms generally foreground more domestic, entertainment-focused "soft" news (Aalberg et al. 2013; Cushion 2022). RT appeared to chart something of a middle ground: it primarily covered hard political or international affairs yet often styled them in a soft, informal, or entertainment-led way.

Even for serious reports, RT's informational chyrons used puns and symbolism to make insinuations about the story's substance. In "Mi$$ing U$Army Kit: Pentagon Fails to Account for $$2bn of Equipment Sent to Iraq—Report" (May 27, 2017), the substantive concern was an intelligence report alleging inadequate accounting and logging of equipment. The dollar sign in the chyron, however, insinuates a more deliberate, profit-driven explanation for the discrepancies. "Netflix and Shill: Obama's National Security Adviser Joins Netflix Board of Directors" (March 29, 2018) features negative Twitter reactions to an Obama-era national security adviser joining the board of Netflix. Absent any specific allegations, the pun of the item's title nonetheless insinuates corruption.

"Strategic humor" can be quite effective at delivering a simple, accessible, and memorable message to global audiences (Chernobrov 2021), and on RT News, sarcasm, humor, and rhetorical questions enabled RT to raise substantive issues in a lighthearted way that encouraged audiences to fill in their own gaps. This speaks to RT's approach to audiences not merely as passive consumers of content but rather as active participants in the reinterpretation and even creation of this content. In contrast to the expectations of the news genre, RT News often repurposed its humorous web content, as when it aired in full numerous episodes of RT's satirical (now defunct) *#ICYMI* video shorts series. This slick social-media, youth-oriented product pushed a conservative political agenda with low-stakes ridicule of progressive politics and contemporary international affairs that invited cynicism and apathy over engagement (Saunders, Crilley, and Chatterje-Doody 2022). RT News incorporated full episodes of *#ICYMI* on topics as diverse as the Iran nuclear deal (May 12, 2018), the US-China trade war (May 11, 2019); Donald Trump's diplomatic activities (July 9, 2018; July 21, 2018), Russian spying allegations (November 10, 2018), and Brexit (November 16, 2018; March 28, 2019; March 30, 2019). Playing up contradictions, scandal, and hypocrisy, *#ICYMI*'s sarcastic rhetorical questions then invited audiences to

draw their own conclusions about political elites and institutions in ways that fit well with RT consumers' understanding of themselves as media savvy and critically engaged (see chapter 7).

RT has often used humor to dispel negative allegations against Russia without substantively engaging with them (see Tolz et al. 2021). Similarly, RT News correspondents joked about the lack of evidence of Russian meddling in the consequently "boring" German election (September 22, 2017) and mocked suggestions that US rapper Kanye West is a Russian spy (May 4, 2018) as an example of "Russians under the bed" public discourse in the United States. The inclusion of such frivolous stories—even to mock them—sidesteps substantive engagement with the underlying themes of meddling and influence while also squeezing out arguably more newsworthy alternative items. Likewise, RT's favored insinuations bled through the platforming and amplification of often frivolous conspiracy theories. Without necessarily endorsing such theories (important from a regulatory perspective), RT's engagement with conspiracy culture shaped the tone and assumptions of its coverage and its insinuations that contemporary political, media, and business elites serve their own interests at the people's expense. RT's recourse to humor and frivolity thus often fit better with its objective of creating affectively appealing identities that promote sympathy for the Russian regime (e.g., of a corrupt and hysterical West) than with reporting actual news.

Grafting soft news styles onto its broadcast news coverage, RT News often made insinuations via infotainment packages combining montages of slides with eye-catching graphics, photographs, and foreign media headlines accompanied by upbeat music. In "Imperial Ambitions" (July 12, 2017), for instance, France's President Macron was humorously likened to Napoleon. Without leveling specific allegations, RT's self-conscious immersion in mediatization saw it deliver media discourse as political reality, with collated Tweets and magazine cover images taken as evidence of the likeness and of widespread public dissatisfaction about this. In-studio presenters frequently threaded the humorous insinuations through their commentaries, whether delivering sarcastic monologues alongside them or reviving them later: the Macron-as-Napoleon idea was repeatedly echoed in anchor commentary in the week following the initial package (July 14, 2017; July 18, 2017). Such humorous engagement with mediatization also often undermined allegations of Russian wrongdoing, as overhyped and baseless Western media allegations were collated with a nod and a wink to the silliness of this supposedly Russophobic discourse (May 20, 2017; September 13, 2017; September 22, 2017; March 3, 2018; November 6, 2018). By suggesting that the Western MSM cannot be trusted—especially when reporting Russia—RT again undermines, without addressing, specific allegations.

Delegation

Everyday routines of professional practice shape all news making, and journalists tend to select experts by balancing prospective commentators' status, credibility, familiarity with the process, directness, and availability. This feeds the MSM preference toward representatives of established political parties and institutions, university-affiliated academics or scientific experts, and business figures (Conrad 1999; Grabe, Zhou, and

Barnett 1999; Berkowitz 2009; Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2009). Selection has historically favored men and those with an existing media record (Steele 1995; Howell and Singer 2017).

Delegation to Particular Subsets of the Commentariat

At the surface level, this standard picture was reflected in RT's approach to sourcing commentators. It featured elected politicians, academics with university affiliations, think tankers from recognized organizations, story participants (e.g., activists or their lawyers), NGO and campaign representatives, and a greater proportion of men than women. It is reasonable to deduce that RT's potential guest pool was smaller than that of mainstream broadcasters due to various political parties' policies of nonengagement with the network (Interviewee K, May 28, 2020; Interviewee D, November 6, 2020—see chapter 2) and the reticence of some mainstream academics and commentators to appear there. Furthermore, there was an RT-specific twist to the inclusion of sources even from standard categories. Beyond the expected strong representation of Russian politicians and diplomats, RT's inclusion of political parties from the countries being reported on tended to feature more extreme or marginal positions (US Libertarian candidates, Germany's right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) and left-wing populist Die Linke, Sweden's right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, and, for the United Kingdom, Euroskeptic UK Independence Party members of the European Parliament).

By the same token, experts with recognizable university or think tank affiliations were in the minority compared with unaffiliated political analysts/consultants or those representing small specialist organizations. Furthermore, compared to the BBC's preference for think tanks without an overt partisan orientation—though with an increase in right-wing representation under the Conservative administration—(Lewis and Cushion 2019), RT more often overtly featured partisan or issue-focused think tanks, especially on the right. Campaign organizations and NGOs were rarely invited to provide background commentary on their specialist areas but to discuss reports in which they criticized establishment institutions or exposed their conduct. So, despite surface-level comparability to mainstream broadcasters' commentator selection, the aggregate picture of RT's commentariat clearly reflected its ideological starting point.

Delegation to "Alternative" Voices

The reliance of self-described "alternative" broadcasters on an alternative commentariat is not in itself surprising. Some explicitly counterhegemonic news outlets—like Al Jazeera English—have applied a normative practice of counter-elite sourcing to deprivilege commentators from elite groups, increase the representation of ordinary citizens, and demonstrate that the establishment is out of touch with real people's lives (Atton and Wickenden 2005; Painter 2008). This approach would seem well suited to RT's stated remit but is not what was observed on RT empirically.

Prior research has found RT's incorporation of alternative sources to be strategic rather than consistent. On RT Spanish, non-elite voices were specifically used to support Russian

foreign policy positions by critiquing nonallies (Hernández and Madrid-Morales 2020). Similarly, where RT News featured participants in events being covered, it tended to be in stories that set them up as an underdog facing off against powerful representatives of the establishment. A good example is the May 26, 2017, item featuring somebody who had been wrongfully convicted and later acquitted of crimes in the United States.

RT's wider population of "alternative" commentators was broadened with some RT-specific categories that often featured former members of establishment institutions in the countries under discussion. These included retired members of the diplomatic corps, armed forces, and security services, as well as those who had left the services as whistleblowers. Another favored category of commentator was the "journalist who can be trusted"—either freelance/independent investigative journalists or those representing alternative news outlets. A few well-reputed investigative journalists were included in this category, but many more appeared to have a low followership and profile beyond the self-referential, highly conspiratorial partisan media space. One illustrative example is Alexander Mercouris of the Duran website, who frequently appeared on RT News (as well as RT discussion programs like *CrossTalk*). The Duran features holocaust deniers as authors and is endorsed by the explicitly conspiratorial EuropeReloaded.com, set up to oppose the ruling "corporate/banking cabal." It has been further endorsed by commentators including the *CrossTalk* presenter Peter Lavelle, Moon of Alabama, Craig Murray, and Vanessa Beeley. These latter three are well plugged-in to the right-wing conspiratorial ecosystem, consistently refute Syrian and Russian culpability for atrocities in Syria and Ukraine, and have been frequently cited by RT over the years.

This speaks to the success with which RT inserted itself into a self-perpetuating alt-media space, from which it drew many other commentators, including a US radio personality called Lionel. Described as a "legal and media analyst," Lionel was consulted on stories about religious freedom of speech on US campuses (November 13, 2018), international espionage scandals (January 5, 2019), and the Mueller report (January 19, 2019), among others. Prioritizing predictability over expertise, RT made no issue of the fact that he rarely appeared well informed on the specific story under discussion. Lionel would reliably segue into a bombastic delivery of general populist arguments about an elitist establishment in league against the common sense of the majority.

The final notable category of commentators on RT were those who can be thought of as "network friends" (see also Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019b). While these included presenters of RT programs interviewed openly, the status of network friends was often concealed, as people with links to Russian state broadcasters were misleadingly presented as independents. Repeated appearances of "Brian Becker, ANSWER coalition," "John Wight, commentator and analyst," and "John Kiriakou, former CIA analyst" all failed to acknowledge their status as current or former presenters on RT's sister outlet, Sputnik. Thus, the "alternative" voices featured on RT are not so much non-elite as counter-elite. The reality is that RT's heavily curated "alternative" commentator pool consistently puts forward those with particular credibility in the partisan media space who can be relied upon to promote a Kremlin-friendly line. While not fitting the mold of disinformation that disseminates falsities as facts, this type of misrepresentation can nonetheless be considered an example of disinformation by deliberate omission.

At times, commentators' independence was reperformed via heated debate sections. This is a fairly common format through which broadcasters facilitate "conversational

violence" from their guests (Luginbühl 2007). Apparent in political discussion shows in the United States ("confrontainment"; Luginbühl 2007) and in Russia ("agitainment"; Tolz and Teper 2018), the key objective of such "mock news" is not to inform but to entertain, with guests' frustration performed on-screen and felt by audiences (Jenks 2022, 60–62). RT News imported such conflicts—exacerbated by a hands-off approach to questioning and moderation—directly into news broadcasts. Excerpts often featured guests visibly and vocally expressing their frustrations or shouting each other down. The resultant conflicts were calibrated to stimulate audiences' affective buy-in to RT's favored identities. So while the network appeared to represent an inclusive "in-group" of its audiences, contrasted with failing elites, the reality is that RT's commentators merely represented an alternative elite: that of the right-wing mediasphere, the network itself, and the country whose interests it was set up to defend.

Delegation to "the People"

Though elite sources remain the most dominant, the use of citizen sources in TV broadcasting has increased steadily over the past twenty-five years while digests of opinions expressed online are often incorporated to imply that a particular (usually emotive) standpoint being reported on has far greater resonance, objectivity, and applicability than the reality (Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017; Beckers and Harder 2016). In the case of RT, citizen sources were incorporated via both vox populi and reference to social media trends and taken as proxies for public opinion. RT used this performative delegation to "the people" to adopt the "citizen" positionality of directly representing its audiences and the "expert" positionality of having access to important truths contained within social media.

For example, a story on November 7, 2018, interposed vox populi in London and Belgrade with criticisms found on Twitter to examine the row over a Serbian Manchester United footballer's decision not to wear a remembrance poppy—a pin customarily worn throughout the United Kingdom in the run up to its annual World War I armistice commemoration. Yet far from genuinely delegating a voice to the people, the vox populi format offers citizens only a shallow, not substantive, voice in news coverage (Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017). What is more, the presentation of unrepresentative social networks as somehow generalizable to a unified public opinion ignores how significantly editorial and production decisions can shape the ideological tone of the content included (Schultziner and Stukalin 2021). Again, RT's performance of neutrality fell short.

Analysts and political commentators alike have tended to approach RT as something in between its stated role as "a global, round-the-clock news network" (RT, n.d.) and its alleged function as "a propaganda bullhorn" (John Kerry, cited in LoGiurato 2014). In reality, RT's coevolution alongside mediatization and marketization has rendered it more contingent. The low appetite for overtly state-led broadcasting projects in a choice-led, saturated global media environment forced RT to experiment and learn from a diverse range of media actors. In a Western media context, the circulatory advantage of the affective, hyperpartisan messaging prevalent in self-reinforcing right-wing media networks has strongly influenced RT's approach: it has crafted its authority to report variously as a journalistic "insider," a nonbiased "expert," a sidelined "victim," a people-focused "citizen," or a corruption-busting "activist" (Figenschou and Ihlebaek 2019, 1232–33). In courting

audiences in the wider world, RT paints itself as at one with them, constructing the identity of a transnational people that the West-dominated MSM and political establishment have together forsaken.

According to RT, the ordinary people that make up its audiences are constantly under attack from both the "elites" above and the "outsiders" beyond. Their concerns can only be adequately represented by RT, which has no vested interests in the system as it is. RT's status as a Russian media outlet is—in and of itself—glanced over in favor of its generically "outsider" credentials, which supposedly afford it a neutral perspective on the pathologies of contemporary politics. As with the broader right-wing alt-media, this positionality exempts the network from any self-evaluation or self-critique: RT does not hold itself to the same ethical and normative standards as Western MSM but foregrounds the sole objective of challenging that mainstream.

Confirming prior research findings on RT's obsession with the United States, this chapter has demonstrated the complementary importance of Europe, MENA, and the United Kingdom. Yet it has also shown how significant regional variations in RT News coverage are transcended by important representational commonalities across the identities RT repeatedly features. Stories were heavily precurated by prompt. They often reflected RT's active engagement with mediatization, responding to other outlets' reporting, published critiques of established institutions, cases of societal division or unrest, and the Russian political elite's statements.

News analysis was similarly curated not so much to inform as to stimulate affect, which helps explain why the conventions of the "hard" news genre were so frequently subverted. RT News often adopted informal communicative practices, the kind of confrontainment/agitainment more often associated with ancillary programming, and a combination of hyperconflictual framing and poor moderation. These affective styles underscored formulaic international identities: the hypocritical and hysterical United States, the terminally divided United Kingdom, a Europe in decline, and a chaotic MENA region suffering the consequences of foreign intervention. Strategically chosen contextual information and rhetorical questions steered audiences toward inferences that could not be explicitly stated. Implicitly contrasted with these identities (and appearing only infrequently as the subject of stories) was RT's Russia—stability-seeking, measured, and diplomatic. Critiques of Russia were only leveled within a local or specific context that absolved the central administration. Conversely, when actively situating Russia within a global context, RT News took on a storytelling role, as with puff pieces on military might and culturally focused FIFA World Cup programming.

RT's "outsider" status was bolstered with the delegation of voice to commentators who could articulate criticisms from outside the system within the societies in question. Yet, despite ostensibly counteracting the elite-led MSM machine, RT primarily delegated to an *alternative* elite: officials from Russia, those privileged in the right-wing alt-media, and within-system critical voices with a reliably Russia-friendly take. Exceptions to these categories helped with the performance of objectivity but were consistently outweighed and stymied by formats that set entertainment above information, argumentation above engagement, and style above substance.

The preceding analysis of RT News lays bare some of the inconsistencies to arise from the network's unconvincing tripartite identity as not just the "Voice of Russia" but also a bastion of alt-media and a credible counterhegemonic international broadcaster. In fact,

and despite its branding, RT News has proven itself an *alternatively* hegemonic product of the prevailing context of global mediatization, even as its outputs routinely critique that context. Its forays into genuinely novel or overlooked perspectives on the world have often been incidental or instrumental—a by-product of the network's attempts to identify itself with its audiences within its construction of the news.

Even in times of normal politics, the *stated* goal of reporting news from an alternative perspective has come a distant second to the construction of various identities: of the network itself, of the transnational people who make up its intended audiences, of the corrupt and hypocritical Western political-media establishment under which they suffer, and of the supposedly impartial and responsible Russia that resists the status quo. Simultaneously a product and critic of mediatization, RT has made identification with its interactive audience a key part of its populist performance. The overriding function of RT News, then, is not the reporting of news—even from an alternative perspective—but the creation, dissemination, and bolstering of particular identities, for which bulletins simply serve as a vessel. Identities come first; news is grafted on. Of these identities, the relational identity connecting Russia and the West recurred with the most frequency and consistency. Although it reached its climax after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, chapter 4 demonstrates its centrality to RT's coverage of the 2019 European Parliament elections.

4

RT'S EUROPEAN UNION 2019 ELECTION COVERAGE

RT's curation practices were abandoned during the international outcry that followed the Salisbury poisonings, then Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. If the mendacious criminality these outrages represented shocked European citizens, RT's role in obfuscating Russian state culpability was unsurprising. It accounted for the Ofcom (2018) investigation identifying RT impartiality breaches during the Salisbury crisis. RT Spanish was accused of promoting COVID-19–related misinformation in 2020 (Peel and Fleming 2020), and similar concerns torpedoed RT German's request for a German broadcasting license (RFE/RL 2022). Nonetheless, definitive action against RT was taken only after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The succession of legal cases against RT form part of the background of this chapter, which treats them in terms of what they mean for the broadcaster's own identity performance while deepening our account of its relationship with populism.

The 2019 European Union (EU2019) was a milestone in the growth of European anxiety about the Kremlin threat to democracy. The event was overshadowed by fears that since the Kremlin had survived the sanctions applied to it after the Crimea and Salisbury crises, Putin was fast realizing his ambition to "remake the West" (Harding 2020). The fact that these fears converged with related EU concerns about the menace posed by populism lent them special intensity. Populist parties had long enjoyed electoral success in former Communist countries, but fueled by widespread post-2008 precarity, they were gaining ground in Western European democracies, including the United Kingdom, where the Brexit Party's xenophobic agenda was absorbed by mainstream conservativism. The fact that its leader, Nigel Farage, like France's Marine Le Pen, had praised Putin's "patriotic"

leadership, combined with Kremlin ties to Hungary's Viktor Orban and to Western alt-right groups (Shekhovtsov 2017), accelerated the confluence of the dual phobias of Russia's challenge to the liberal order and the contempt for that order expressed by Orban, Farage, and Le Pen. Orban's continued allegiance to Putin following his violent incursion into Ukraine caused heightened consternation among liberal commenters keen to present a united European front against Russian barbarism.

Farage, Le Pen, and members of Orban's government appeared regularly on RT, and given the negative post-Salisbury publicity still surrounding the broadcaster, it was expected to spearhead Kremlin efforts to influence EU2019. This expectation required caution on RT's part; it operated under the jurisdictions of states with which the Kremlin remained in dispute and was answerable to regulators disinclined to indulge it. When its Western broadcasting licenses were revoked in 2022, its public diplomacy ambitions (and guarantee of Kremlin largesse) were threatened, forcing it to reposition itself within the global communications landscape while recalibrating its relationship with populism. Its postinvasion fate did not completely terminate its requirement to commute across the three functions constituting its tripartite identity: voice of the Russian state, alternative media (alt-media) rebel, and international news provider, some of whose target audiences find credible. From 2022 the last of these functions was harder to sustain, whereas collaborations with Russia's intelligence services became more overt.

In analyzing how RT reconciled that tension prior to 2022, we also show how populism informed its response to the dilemma presented by EU2019. We locate the driving force of RT's populist stance in its efforts to exploit the criticism of its operation that reached its preinvasion peak on the eve of the elections when the populist upsurge threatened to engulf the EU. In constructing a transnational "people" whom EU elites manipulate and deceive, RT positioned Russia as a primary object of this process, one whose own underdog status accorded it a beacon-like role for adversaries of Western hegemony. It linked this hegemony to a corrupted democratic system of which the EU was the epitome and whose generalized flaws accounted for RT's opportunistic endorsements of antiestablishment voices of both the Left and Right. Although RT's ability to co-opt such voices diminished after 2022, its populist system of representation did not collapse.

Both RT's strategy and the Russophobic anxieties to which it claims to respond reflect a centuries-old identity dynamic via which Russia serves as the West's semiorientalized alter-ego onto which it projects the image of its own dark underbelly (Malia 2000; Tsygankov 2019a). Heightened EU fears of Russian malfeasance reflect broader concerns about the ability of multiple internal populist actors to expose gaping iniquities. RT's reaction is in turn linked to a Russian identity predicated on a Europe in which it imagines itself alternatively as the epitome, the mistreated outcast, and the antithesis (Tolz 2011). The EU elections encounter illuminated a deeply rooted, spiraling conflict in which RT's pariah status is constantly cocreated anew. This process informed RT's subsequent approach to the 2020 US presidential election and to the Ukraine war whose shadow looms proleptically across our book.

Conceptual Framework

Chapter 3 adopted Brubaker's understanding of the two axes of populist logic—vertical and horizontal—across which different populist antagonisms are negotiated: from top to bottom (a hardworking people pitted from below against a privileged elite or from above against a contemptible underclass) and from inside to outside (a people threatened by grasping migrants or by alien superstates; Brubaker 2017, 362–65). In the EU's case, one axis is superimposed on the other, rendering it a uniquely potent source of populist resentment. EU elites are both above and beyond disadvantaged populaces, while needy EU migrants are outside yet also below them.

Brubaker posits a repertoire of adaptable populist tactics (2017, 360–62). They include advocating for a downtrodden majority, valorizing the immediacy of direct expression, adopting a low style of verbal expression, protecting the people from external threats, and antagonistically repoliticizing depoliticized realms. Brubaker's emphasis on low cultural style and immediacy reflects his recognition of how mediatization facilitates access to populist communication tools for excluded, nonelite actors (2017, 369–71). He notes, however, that this phenomenon is balanced by opportunities afforded by mediatization to political elites to bypass mainstream mediators and address the people directly.

Brubaker's argument is developed in Gerbaudo's (2018) account of the "elective affinity" between social media forms and populism, the willing transgression of authority and use of vernacular forms, plebiscite legitimation methods based on interactive voting and "liking," the rallying of crowds, and the value of sensationalist content. Working with the grain of this digital environment, RT subverts mainstream journalistic standards, building its "alternative" broadcaster identity by mimicking social media's combative irreverence (Littow 2019). Russia's invasion of Ukraine (which cemented RT's pariah status across the Western world) both bolstered and undermined this identity (the bans imposed on RT deprived it of the terrain on which to enact that identity).

RT's approach to the elective affinities linking its digital style to populist politics is further illuminated by Laclau's (2007) notion of a "people" constructed performatively through the discursive establishment of "chains of equivalence" that unify the demands of different underdog groups but never preexist their moment of articulation. For the act of unification to occur, an *empty signifier* must link the various claims of oppression to the name of a singular "people." This differential chain creates an unfulfilled totality for which one signifier assumes representation, subordinating the other demands to it in a hegemonic act (for Laclau, "hegemony" is not inherently negative). Because that signifier "floats" (its role in converting differentiated into equivalent demands can be adopted by any of the demanding groups) it is empty of meaning prior to its unifying function.

Laclau's theory accounts for populist efforts to unite competing interest groups in opposing a common enemy. In a mediatizing world, Brubaker's axes of othering and repertoires of resistance combine with online crowd-rallying techniques to facilitate a fusion particularly accommodating to actors that oppose hierarchical mainstream media (MSM) forms and reject key traits of establishment politics, including institutionalization, moderation, formality, and claims to rationality. This chapter explores how RT fulfills its potential within a populist process spanning national boundaries.

Our approach eschews portrayals of RT as a purely situation-driven exploiter of nonmainstream discourses. Rather than theorizing a Habermasian digital public sphere threatened by an insurgent, antipublic periphery in which alt-right discourses prevail without cohering, we follow Brubaker's account of a transnational populism enabled by the

"frictionless circulation of spreadable content" (Davis 2021). This causes "diverse forms of anti-public discourse formerly siloed across multiple domains … to meld into … a coherent discourse via the use of anti-elite/anti-Other culture wars" (Davis 2020, 12).

The integrative potency of RT's haphazard adoption of political positions belies the complacency of those who suggest that the antiestablishment beliefs that RT ventriloquizes subsist only at the extremes of Western society. Populism's ideological synthesis "inhabits the very center of politics" in many Western nations. Rather than "an anomalous reaction to abnormal circumstances," it is "well connected to mainstream ideas and in tune with broadly shared mass-attitudes" (Davis 2020, 12). This symbiosis of public and antipublic spheres facilitates RT's deployment of the populist hybrid's crowd-rallying and othering practices. Moreover, in a signal of the contradictory juncture at which Europe finds itself, the very fact that this new (anti)cosmopolitanism is articulated transnationally legitimizes the nationalist prejudices that it serves. These prejudices find their primary target in the supposedly antidemocratic EU colossus, antipathy to which gained populist momentum from both COVID-19 conspiracies and Russia's military assault on the EU's new flag bearer (Ukraine). RT may have been expelled from Western public spheres, but the organic networks it established with populist actors within those spheres makes expulsion of the narratives to which it was affiliated more challenging.

Brubaker explains the paradox in attributing transnational force to a politics built on nationalist exclusionism by showing how different populisms unify against common transnational elites. The EU establishment's purported Russophobia binds the different exclusionisms, especially given Laclau's emphasis on populism as "something that is done" rather than a fixed "worldview" (quoted in Moffitt 2017, 415). Moffit notes how certain media position themselves as "a proxy for the people," using their global reach to promote claims made in one context across national borders and thereby actively "conferring acceptance" upon those claims as speaking "for the [transnational] people themselves" (Moffitt 2017, 419). RT used its multilingual output to this end by highlighting how Russophobia distracts attention from problems internal to the liberal order that the EU embodies. The method by which RT mitigated tensions between its state advocacy mission and its immersion in non-Russian media contexts acquired new twists when Russia transgressed the borders of Ukraine, the liberal order's eastern outpost (Tierney 2022; Way 2022).

Sources and Methods

We apply our conceptual framework to RT's coverage of EU2019 across five language channels (English, French, German, Spanish, and Russian). First, to determine the scale and consistency of RT's social media output we conducted a data analysis of tweets from RT accounts for five key days during the week of EU2019 (including the day of the UK vote, May 23). We counted tweets shared by the five channels on various RT Twitter accounts from May 22–26, 2020. We examined the most popular RT hashtags over these five days, highlighting those referring to the elections. For temporal comparison, we considered RT Twitter activity a year prior to, and two months after, EU2019.

The Twitter overview is followed by a manual volume analysis of relevant news reports,

op-eds, videos, and documentaries on the various RT websites before, during, and after the week of EU2019—from May 20, 2019, to May 31, 2019. The numbers of items are as follows:

- RT France: forty-four (including links to five vox pop videos sampling voter attitudes to the elections; RT France was alone in providing election night live analysis)
- RT UK: fifty-six (plus five additional television shows addressing EU2019-related themes; the higher number of items for RT UK reflects EU2019's close entwinement with Brexit)
- RT German: forty-one (including several videos)
- RT Spanish: twenty-eight (including several videos); the lower number reflects the fact that this channel's main audience is in Latin America
- RT Russian: forty-five (mostly brief, factual reports but also including five YouTube videos based on tendentious TV coverage)

We examine the themes covered, the repertoires deployed, and the populist axes selected and combined; the manner of reporting; the vernacularizing and transgression strategies adopted; and the networking and remediation modes. Interpreting resemblances and differences across the language operations requires us to account for performative as well as referential meanings. Similarity across the outlets could indicate central coordination to ensure conformity with Kremlin messaging or coalescence around a popular anti-EU agenda that transcends Russian state interests. Conversely, divergence could signal a chaotic lack of coordination, a calculated effort to dissemble by mimicking independence, or, alternatively, a willingness to delegate to local editors. This range of options reflects the tripartite combination of broadcasting modes and diverse regulatory environments in which RT operated before 2022. Addressing the attendant ambiguities, we highlight the discursive effect of RT's different stances, emphasizing what, driven by global media processes and populist logics, it does (sometimes unwittingly) over what it says (its overt message). This enables us to show how, prior to the Ukraine war, RT inserted itself into an identity dynamic involving its archrivals—mainstream Western IBs—while maintaining its different functions intact. The end of that balancing act in 2022 did not terminate the dynamic, which assumed the new formation in which RT now operates.

Russian Digital Assault as a Nonevent

Following evidence of Russian attempts to interfere in other electoral processes, EU2019 was anticipated to witness a targeted increase in online activities by RT. Based on our analysis of its two main anglophone accounts (RT.com and RT UK; appendix, table A.1), statistical variation between the periods we selected for comparison are, however, insignificant.

Although the peak election period elicited an increase in volumes of tweets, the differences are minimal and the overall numbers modest. The one channel in which the growth and subsequent diminution in output before and after EU2019 is noteworthy is RT Arabic, whose target audiences have little investment in the EU (appendix, table A.2).

To gauge the extent to which EU2019 was targeted, we compared the most common hashtags cited by RT and by users responding to it (appendix, tables A.3 and A.4). Apart from its French operation, RT's European-language channels did not prioritize the elections. Even for RT France, the numbers are too small to evidence a Europe-wider campaign. On the contrary, the picture is one of a careful effort to avoid such allegations, and this "performative" aspect of RT's approach is more significant. Our findings accord with two other investigations aimed at measuring Russian digital activity during EU2019. They each confirm that levels were low (Birnbaum and Timberg 2019; Syrovátka 2019). For a fuller picture, however, we must go beyond data analysis.

Toeing the (Moscow) Line?

The channel's broadcast operation tells a subtly different story. Comparison across RT's European operations reveals a pattern: that for EU2019 it reserved its most sympathetic treatment for political parties with Kremlin ties. RT German represented politicians according to this criterion particularly overtly. Reporting on the Russia-related scandal engulfing the Austrian government during the elections evinced sympathy for its Kremlin-friendly victims, the ousted vice chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache and chancellor Sebastian Kurz (RT German 2019e, 2019i). In contrast, Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), which supports sanctions against Russia, was treated negatively, and reports on Germany's other main party, Sozialdemocratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), highlighted its dismal electoral showing.

RT France strongly endorsed national sovereignty discourses—a central Kremlin tenet that acquired new potency, and a bizarre imperial twist, during the Ukraine war. "Le Souverainisme" is openly practiced by Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) party. But RT France's promotion of sovereignty discourses transcended this context. In discussing the results, a member of the République Souveraine (Sovereign Republic) movement, Djordje Kuzmanovic, characterized the newfound Euroskepticism of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the French Socialist leader, and of the French Ecologists Party as proof that "the line of independence and sovereignty was correct" (Kuzmanovic 2019).

Editorially, RT France approved of Le Pen's RN, a right-wing populist party aligned to the Kremlin's "conservative values." This bias was reflected in the fact that RN spokespeople were represented on every EU-related discussion program on RT France's television channel. Though strong, RN significantly failed to outperform Macron's party and thus to provoke the anticipated political earthquake—a fact that RT France begrudgingly acknowledged (RT France 2019d).

For RT Spanish, Kremlin alignment was detectable in the treatment allotted to Josef Borell, Spain's foreign minister, whom Spain had proposed in September 2019 to be EU high representative. Borell's criticisms of Russia were portrayed as hypocritical. His references to Russia as an "old enemy" were juxtaposed with earlier footage of him thanking Russia for supporting Spain's position during the Catalan independence referendum crisis. RT Spanish criticized Spain's populist party, Vox, despite its traditional values message, an approach reflecting Vox's relative lack of Kremlin ties (RT Spanish 2019b, 2019c).

Similarly, RT UK's sympathy for Farage's Brexit Party was tempered by the fact that its ties to Moscow were tenuous and that UK antiestablishment sentiment was not restricted to the pro-Leave Right. RT UK also extensively covered Jeremy Corbyn, whose left-wing antagonism to UK media bias and criticism of Western colonialism endears him to RT (RT 2019h, 2019j). Sensitive to local conditions, RT capitalizes on antiestablishment sentiment regardless of its coloring. Nonetheless, the greater part of RT UK's EU2019 coverage targeted *Remainers* whose commitment to liberal internationalism contradicted Kremlin interests. RT UK's mocking humor found an easy victim in the United Kingdom's passionate Remainer community, which served as a receptacle for the foibles of liberal "woke" culture. When the new centrist grouping Change UK mistakenly bought an advertisement confusing the EU with the United Kingdom, RT UK's gleeful mockery epitomized its mastery of the tabloid humor typical of social media (RT 2019a).

RT Russian's approach to EU2019 was underwhelming. Russian-language content on its documentary channel featured no relevant output during our monitoring period. Beyond it, the channel featured four tendentious interviews with politicians who portrayed an EU in deep crisis. Three were with prominent Euroskeptics (RT Documentary 2014a, 2014b, 2019). All four emphasized the chasm between the elites' desire for greater integration and ordinary voters' longing for sovereignty.

The EU as a Shared Object of Transnational Populist Ire

More important than its endorsement of Kremlin positions on specific international developments is the extent to which RT appropriates populist critiques of EU elitism, favoring the antiliberal values underpinning them and working with other alt-media outlets to confirm the EU's function as the object of transnational populist anger along both vertical and horizontal axes and as the hypostasis of a failed democratic model. This narrative, long in the making, attained its apotheosis in Kremlin propaganda justifying the invasion of Ukraine.

RT UK was strikingly consistent in promoting perspectives highlighting EU indifference to popular concerns. It seemed more willing to appropriate the populist vocabulary of "elite" and "establishment" than RT France, which reserved such a lexicon for its op-ed columns. An article listing the main issues for EU voters uses a quote from the Euroskeptic commentator John Laughland for its title, endorsing populist sentiment about the EU's "fake democracy" to frame an ostensibly neutral overview (RT 2019b). RT UK was likewise adept in molding the inconclusive election outcome to its populist narrative, focusing on an increase in voter turnout. When this exceeded expectations, RT UK celebrated the fact to validate its account of a populist wave sweeping Europe (RT 2019c).

RT UK stridently denigrated migration. Britain's conservative parties were regularly described as "anti-immigration" (a label avoided by RT France), and the anti-EU narrative that RT UK shared with its sister outlets took a more anti-immigrant tone. An article featuring expert analysis of the election results began by reporting that "migration was a top issue" and featured as its first subheading "Migration Crisis Still Haunts EU" (RT 2019b). RT UK deployed both of Brubaker's othering axes (inside to outside; top to

bottom) with equal gusto. Here the EU furnishes an image of an alienating abstraction whose distance from ordinary people is embodied in the figure of the racially different illegal migrant.

RT France's othering of the EU was skewed to the vertical axis, featuring multiple critiques of the organization's bureaucracy. A lead article published a week before the vote mocked a European Commission campaign promoting eleven EU benefits and intended to "combat voter apathy." The article highlighted negative responses to the campaign as expressed in embedded tweets. These included mocking references to "10 examples of fake news in a single tweet: quite something!" and a list of EU vices including "poverty; debt; mass unemployment; and de-industrialization" (RT France 2019j).

Most interviewees in RT France's vox pop series, even those endorsing pro-EU parties, referred to their alienation from European decision-making. Given that turnout in 2019 was higher than in 2014, RT France had to change tack. An article published on the day of the vote acknowledged that rates were up across Europe but used this fact as the backdrop for an analysis that pointed to a long-term "freefall" of turnout in France and to the abysmal figures for Eastern European countries (RT France 2019h). An op-ed by Pierre Lévy, a frequent RT France commentator, likewise placed the rise in turnout in the wider context of an unprecedented "propaganda campaign" described as a conspiracy authored by a shady, EU-orchestrated conglomeration of employers, trade unions, and clerical institutions (Lévy 2019b). The op-ed was translated for RT German, though it appeared in the latter outlet earlier than in RT France (indicating coordination across RT's different language outlets for content deemed strategically valuable).

RT France, however, avoided anti-immigration politics, both content- and performance-wise. It featured one substantive piece about the issues dominating the preelectoral political agenda in which immigration was accorded a ten-line paragraph noting the contradictions in right-wing anti-immigrant positions (RT France 2019c). This paragraph ended with a link to an earlier article in which anti-immigration assumptions of the parties concerned, including those associated with the white nationalist Great Replacement conspiracy, were placed in distancing quotes (RT France 2019g). Elsewhere, RT France noted the first success achieved by the Union of Democratic Muslims, whose referencing of "rampant French Islamophobia" lacks the scare quotes applied to anti-immigrant rhetoric (RT France 2019f).

Thus, RT France's own endorsement of sovereigntism was balanced by a conflicting pro-Muslim, pro-immigration position that, while exploiting French societal tensions, echoed Russia's own complex identarian stances on immigration and Islam (Flood et al. 2012). RT France was free of the broader, anti–politically correct, antiwokeness rhetoric of its sister channels, rhetoric that also inflects Russian state discourse. RT France's rejection of this ideological baggage was performatively expressed via its ubiquitous deployment of the Black woman presenter Lilaafa Amouzou. RT France's was, then, a sovereigntism without borders.

The vertical othering narrative of the elites versus the people was endorsed systematically yet contradictorily by RT German. Its online articles arguing that the EU establishments invoked illusory notions with regard to the "European people" coexisted with others using just such notions. Ultimately, they suggested that "European people" did not exist as beneficiaries of EU policies but only as EU citizens disenfranchised by these policies (Lévy 2019a; RT German 2019i). RT German bemoaned the EU's neglect of

ordinary people's interests via a "sham electoral process motivated by the goal of depriving nations of the freedom to make political decisions" (Lévy 2019a).

Populism's vertical othering axis dominated RT Spanish's EU2019 coverage, which pitted self-serving EU elites against a European people represented homogenously (RT Spanish 2019e). In line with populist strategies, the crisis narrative was constructed around EU failures in dealing with migration, as well as its pursuit of policies benefiting only elites (RT Spanish 2019a). The crisis theme dominated RT Russian's EU2019 reports. Unlike in 2022, when it epitomized RT's war coverage, here it was an outlier owing to its promotion of outlandish conspiracy theories of the sort that RT International avoided; one op-ed attributed the UK prime minister Theresa May's postelection resignation to the "unmasking of the dubious actions of the [British] security services" (Drobnitskii 2019).

Alt-mediating Big (Br)Other

RT's populist techniques were not limited to its portrayal of the EU as an Orwellian Big (Br)Other. Performatively, its adoption of vernacular postures—a consistent feature of its mimicking of an alt-media mode hitherto associated with democratization—came to the fore in the context of that institution's defining electoral event. RT's alt-media self-identification is epitomized by RT German, whose assault on the German MSM foregrounded its relationship with the Russian state; it depicted German media representations of Russia as examples of "brainwashing" aimed at "constructing enemies" (Ungar 2020). As we show later, contrasting conceptualizations of Europe and disinformation formed the Ukraine war's ideational battleground.

RT German's narrative mines the populist repertoire (Brubaker 2017, 6), including what, in a related theorization, Boykoff (2013, 796) terms the "disproportionate visibility" of populist actors who temporarily acquire social media celebrity status. A quarter of relevant items in our chosen period featured one story—a viral video by the YouTube blogger Rezo urging German citizens not to vote for the CDU/CSU (Klinkhammer and Bräutigam 2019; RT German 2019c, 2019i). Here RT German crudely marries hyperpartisan, alt-media gestures with its function as Russia's voice.

RT France's immersion in online populist styles proved appropriate for EU2019. It used multiple scare quotes, humorously posed questions, and other ironic devices to indicate political contempt for the mainstream opinion on the EU that it was nonetheless obliged to air. When the liberal intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy recommended that xenophobic opinion be deplatformed in EU2019, RT France (2019a) quoted him liberally but framed the story with the sarcastic headline: "Bernard-Henri Lévy Proposes to Discount Votes He Doesn't Like."

Another RT France tactic was to deploy free speech values against the establishment. Before the elections, RT France had been banned from En Marche press conferences for breaching journalistic standards. It subsequently staged several confrontations exploiting its expulsion. One occurred on EU2019 results night. Video footage of the reporter Lilaafa Amouzou being ejected from En Marche headquarters was replayed repeatedly and uploaded to YouTube (RT's related victimhood narrative was deployed extensively in 2022, following the various war-related restrictions imposed on it; RT France 2019b).

A complementary RT France strategy was the incorporation within ostensibly conventional news genres of local alt-media themes, voices, and styles. One RT France story focusing on a group of alternative vloggers invited into the European Commission to be "educated" about its benefits was carried by RT UK and RT German. The story included interviews in which the vloggers compare their experience to George Orwell's *1984* (RT France 2019i). Likewise common to all RT outlets is the peppering of reports constructed according to mainstream genre conventions with scare quotes, sarcastic rhetorical questions, and hyperlinks to alt-media sources.

RT UK applied similar techniques, liberally adorning "woke" terms like "hate groups" with scare quotes yet omitting them from polemical alt-right collocations, including "thought police." This technique accommodates RT's own language with that of its (younger, less deferential) users but also bolsters the populist import of its own political positions with authentic "ordinary" voices. Thus, the RT UK version of the RT France article mocking the EU's eleven "benefits" was structured around disdainful social media responses to the relevant EU tweet, imported in original form (RT 2019e).

As a populist actor, RT UK intuits online humor's chaotic spontaneity—hence its sensitivity to the rallying function of memes and trends, sometimes adopting them merely to ride the waves they generate. One article covered a viral Twitter story focused on the handsome sound engineer widely photographed at Theresa May's resignation press conference. A comical "hot podium guy for PM2" meme emerged, with associated hashtag, along with political speculation about who would succeed May. The article included an embedded YouTube video of the engineer testing the podium equipment, along with multiple tweets from female admirers who, in turn, generated over twenty thousand comments—a large number relative to other RT UK articles.

Referentially, the story was trivial, but performatively it facilitated the channel's integration into the rituals of social media aficionados, epitomizing social media's capacity to rally crowds liable to fragment along ideological lines via a unifying feel-good story. It demonstrated RT's adeptness at eliding different tactics within the populist repertoire. The sequence of lighthearted tweets constituting the remainder of the article was framed by a single opening sentence noting British public disaffection with "serious" electoral politics (RT 2019g).

RT Spain followed suit, adopting a low-register style and resorting to satirical, childlike cartoons to explain the history of the United Kingdom's relationship with Brussels (RT Spanish 2019d, 2019f). For RT Russian, the primary illustration of its performative rehearsal of populist styles was its willingness to indulge implausible conspiracy theories targeting EU politicians (Drobnitskii 2019).

Mainstreaming the Alt-mediated Self

To fulfill its pre-2022 mission, RT hoped to combine its role as establishment scourge with those of Russian-state mouthpiece and effective alternative to the BBC. Its dual status as aspirant alt-media upstart and Kremlin voice was managed uneasily via the selective endorsement of Moscow-affiliated political forces and through its pursuit of populist critiques of EU elitism. Both variants contradicted RT's mainstream broadcaster

aspirations, however, to which perceived Kremlin ties were a hindrance. A solution to this problem was forced on RT when it was expelled from Western media space, though it still needed to reconcile its state sponsorship with its postinvasion alt-media posture (see chapter 9). The paradox faced by all international broadcasters (IBs) is that their credibility as reliable news purveyors is indirectly proportional to their identification with their sponsoring state (Wright, Scott, and Bunce 2020). Such plausibility demands from IBs a capacity to shed this identification and merge with their operating environments.

Until 2022, RT France emphatically strove to blend with its local context, not least by adopting a curation/news aggregator function based on reproducing mainstream French news agendas, often faithfully, sometimes with an RT slant. It also mirrored mainstream reporting principles such as balance, opinion sampling, source transparency, and distance between quoted statements and journalist positions. RT France's EU2019 coverage was comprehensive, accurate, and well contextualized. Three days before the elections, RT France broadcast an episode of its newest political talk show, *Interdit d'Interdire*, hosted by the respected journalist Frédéric Taddeï and focusing on whether voters should abstain from voting (Taddeï resigned following Russia's invasion of Ukraine; Les Crises 2019). Like other editions, the debate was multifaceted and well moderated. Op-ed pieces aside, RT France's EU2019 reporting was understated. Elements in the results that proved inconvenient to previous RT France narratives (the likely triumph of Euroskeptic populist parties and abysmal voter turnout) were acknowledged. The overwhelming pro-EU victory in Ireland was reported, albeit with reference to Brexit-related circumstances (RT France 2019e).

RT UK's EU2019 coverage was also cautiously factual. Here similarity rather than difference between RT channels is attributable to local conditions: both RT UK (following the 2018 Ofcom investigation) and RT France (under constant scrutiny) felt pressured to follow accepted journalistic standards. In each case this adherence intensified during EU2019—hence RT France's assiduous eschewal of antimigrant rhetoric and RT UK's efforts to balance its hitherto slanted pro-Brexit stance with pro-EU perspectives. During EU2019, RT UK delivered a "churnalist" master class—remediating reports from elsewhere or pegged to claims already aired in mainstream outlets. Like RT France, RT UK acknowledged that, despite populist successes, the anticipated breakthrough proved elusive (RT 2019i). It echoed its French counterpart in demonstrating conventional journalistic restraint.

Lacking a large European audience, RT Spanish made little effort to mimic its establishment nemeses, referring only twice to Spain's MSM. RT German's outlier status owes more to its uniform alt-media posture. RT Russian followed the official domestic line rather than prioritizing the heterogenous, diasporic Russophone perspectives it ostensibly targets. This principle held true throughout EU2019, confirming that, notwithstanding European fears to the contrary, the elections were not a Kremlin priority.

The Russians Aren't Coming!

If its Spanish, German, and Russian operations placed them at RT's notional margins, the mainstream news mimicry tactics adopted by RT UK and RT France established these

outlets as the corresponding "center," though the Ukraine war reconfigured RT's core/periphery structure (chapters 8–9). Their shared tendency to temper their hyperpartisan EU2019 reporting with remediated mainstream stories burnishing their image as serious news providers belonged to a uniform strategy designed to disguise Russia's presence at the heart of European media space. The backdrop to EU2019 was the persistent media prediction of Russian "interference," however. The studied disinterest evident in these two outlets' output could, therefore, also paradoxically signal the reverse: a deliberate performance of "non-Russianness" designed to refute European establishment allegations. EU2019 thus helped resolve the tension resulting from RT's efforts to articulate an identity straddling the mainstream/alt-media divide: precisely by mimicking mainstream liberal eclecticism, it boldly upended accusations against it made by these same liberal journalists, realizing its disruptive antiestablishment mission. The Ukraine invasion torpedoed this strategy but left RT's acutely self-reflexive identity practices intact.

The atmosphere surrounding EU2019 was so febrile that Russia could not be skirted around. Thus, RT France's and RT UK's ostentatious, if limited, performance of journalistic professionalism designed to negate the impression of Kremlin manipulation was insufficient. A different tactic involved highlighting, and discrediting, the incessant news about possible Russian malfeasance. An RT France (2019j) article included a pointed reference toward how vloggers were shown examples of disinformation and told, to their mocking incredulity: "And all of this was organized by Russia!" Here, Russian noninterference is performed neither by masking Russian state influence nor by negating anticipated state broadcaster behavior but by openly confronting the allegations. Another RT France article masquerading as a neutral account of Macron's fears of a secret alliance between RT and "foreign powers" brims with qualifying words like "supposed" and with ironic rephrasing of the fears expressed by an En Marche representative (RT France 2019k).

A generally informative RT France survey of opinion polls on issues of concern to French people acknowledged the importance attributed by France's electorate to the ecological crisis but noted that the fear of Russian interference appeared fourth among the top ten concerns, below green issues, immigration, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When broaching the Russia question, it lurched into sarcastic invocations of the "Russian scarecrow" (RT France 2019c). This, then, is less the performance of Russian noninterference than the most direct assertion of it.

RT UK amplified the tactic. It replicated both the RT France vlogger story and the report concerning the EU Commission tweet touting its "benefits." RT UK's version of the story was more consistently framed by the Russophobia theme, concluding: "They told us that disinformation … was used by Russia to destabilize democratic regimes but, fortunately for European democracy, French 'special groups' [i.e., vloggers] are stronger than that" (RT 2019f).

RT UK's more aggressive assertions of Russian noninterference may have reflected the Ofcom investigation into it. It blamed establishment media for "exaggerating the specter of 'Russia' " to stem the rising populist tide, straining to disprove the "Russophobic pronouncements" of European leaders, and juxtaposing the assertion of Russian noninterference with fears of populism (RT 2019d). There was, however, less evidence here of RT France's performative strategy of implicitly rebutting anti-Kremlin discourses by exposing Western suppressions of free expression.

The most consistent denial strategy was pursued by RT German, 27 percent of whose

election-related reports (eleven items) were devoted to refuting Russia's involvement—the largest single issue covered. It obsessively traced accusations against Russia and eventual acknowledgments that there was little evidence of Russian meddling, citing scientific bodies, security services, and ordinary citizens who corroborated this assertion (RT German 2019b, 2019f, 2019g). RT German also replicated the related strategy, deployed by its sister channels, of leveling against German media their own criticism of Russia, reiterating the claim regarding the German MSM's monotonous conformity (RT German 2019a).

RT Spanish barely broached accusations of Russian interference, confirming its limited engagement with EU2019. More surprisingly, RT Russian also avoided the issue, briefly mentioning the EU's attempts to blame the Kremlin for its own failings and referring to an EU official acknowledging that there was no "foreign interference" (RT Russian 2019a, 2019b). The fact that the most vigorous refutations of the meddling accusation were left to RT's Western European outlets, which had pursued similarly elaborate efforts to mask their state links, leads us to reexamine this apparent tension, along with the notion that the EU2019-populism nexus offered RT an opportunity to reconcile the contradictions characterizing its tripartite identity. Since "Russophobia" became a key Kremlin line of defense during the Ukraine war, awareness of the prewar history of its deployment is essential.

Populism's Missing Link

RT's four-pronged approach to allegations of Russian meddling (rationally "disproving"; humorously mocking; performatively undermining; engaging in populist polemic) aligned its alt-media and IB stances. It also minimized the disparities between strategies shared across channels (the endorsement of populist denigrations of EU elitism) and the features that differentiate those outlets (RT German's bold use of alt-media bloggers; the more traditional approach adopted by RT UK and France).

What of the remaining tension pitting (1) the efforts of individual outlets to blend with their operating environments as autonomous local actors and (2) their need to implement a single strategy dictated by their sponsor's interests? We should first recall how RT's post-2009 rebranding exacerbated this tension, confirming Western fears of Russia's propensity for mass deception. Rather than merely refute such suspicions, however, RT used EU2019 to perfect a counterstrategy: that of openly embracing its pariah status. In this context the restrictions imposed on it in 2022 could be portrayed retrospectively as the apotheosis of a decade-long "anti-Russian" campaign.

The process began with RT's emphasis on the association between the MSM—the main source of supposedly Russophobic warnings about threats to EU2019—and the EU establishment. This was at the forefront of RT German's denigration of Germany's main television channel as a Cold War propaganda tool. The next stage—RT's explicit self-positioning among the victims of EU prejudice—was illustrated by recurring footage of the ejection of RT's Black reporter from Macron's party headquarters and by RT UK's version of the online French vloggers' account of their EU Commission visit. In highlighting their disdain for condemnations of Russian disinformation, RT UK's appropriative move

associated RT both with Russian disinformation and with popular resistance to the elitist mythmaking behind such "false" narratives, whose roots are traceable to a corrupt liberal Leviathan "justly" assailed from left and right.

The fact that, like other stories, the French vloggers' account featured on several language services brings us to the third stage of RT's transformation of its pariah status: its transnationalizing of the victimhood represented by various local targets of EU oppression. RT's translingual dissemination of monolingual stories of popular resistance actively constituted a single European people. The fact that the RT France (2019i) vlogger story was remediated by both RT UK (RT 2019f) and RT German (2019h), that Pierre Lévy's op-ed article on low voter turnout was published by both RT France and RT German (Lévy 2019a, 2019b), and that Laughland's diatribe against EU "fake democracy" was translated for RT Spanish (2019e) indicates more than an economizing of resources (RT 2019b); its transnational unification effect complemented the interweaving of disparate grievances across political lines (class based; ethnonationalist; antiliberal; ecological). Portrayals of RT as a chameleon-like opportunist miss the point—an oversight of relevance to RT's radical reorientation to non-Western audiences in 2022.

Of the grievances aired by RT during EU2019, those coalescing around Russophobia were particularly notable. The empty signifier potential with which Russophobia-related grievances are invested is facilitated by the association of "the people"—a collective identity not yet instantiated in concrete form—with the qualities of an equally unrealized "authentic, grassroots democracy." In its coverage, RT exploited increasingly vacuous uses of the term "democracy" by Western politicians who fail to acknowledge that rather than the tightly defined, value-based system they portray it as, democracy spans multiple variants (direct and representative). Thus, both Russophobia and democracy function as interdependent empty signifiers when RT strives to establish populist "chains of equivalence" that discursively unify the demands of disparate victims of Western hegemonic powers, among whom Russia is implicitly allotted a central role.

RT German reinforced Russia's status as prime among the EU's victimized underdogs. Its claims regarding the absence of EU democracy mirrored the familiar criticism aimed at Russia's own state-subservient media, fake civil society, and neoimperial foreign policy. RT German pursued this mirroring logic to its conclusion in attributing true democratic principles to the Russian electoral system (Ungar 2020).

A subtler example of the alignment of Russia with other "EU victims" was an RT UK article linking Guy Verhofstadt's claim that Russia's specter haunts the election to parallel European fears of the rise of populism. The link is strengthened by the fact that "baseless Russophobia" and "elitist EU efforts to suppress an indignant European people" were RT's two main translingual themes. This allowed Russia's grievances about its victimization simultaneously to enter the chain of equivalent grievances of other "victims" of the EU elites. Tensions between RT's need to mask its state provenance to maintain its local credibility and its mandate to serve its sponsoring state in a coordinated fashion are thus resolved. The strategy is one of occluding Russia's presence in European public space, not ostentatiously saturating that space with Russian policy narratives. EU2019 also reconciled the splits within RT's tripartite identity: the MSM aspirations (its remediation of European news agendas), the alt-media populist assault on "MSM hypocrisy" (the establishment prejudices of its mainstream rivals are now open to populist ridicule), and its allegiance to Moscow (which presents Western Russophobia as a strategic narrative).

Cocreating the Populist Pariah and the Reciprocity Dynamic

The cocreation of RT's pariah status by the Russophobia narrative on one side and by obsessive suspicion of Russian intentions on the other reflects an enduring identity dynamic entwining the West and Russia. It involves a reciprocal antagonism that is also a mutual projection onto the Other of flaws residing within the respective selves. Europe's exaggeration of the scale of Russian assaults on Western democracy matched the historical patterns of fluctuating Western perceptions of Russia analyzed by Martin Malia, who showed that "a heightened sense of hostility towards Russia is not inevitably caused by aggressiveness on her part; nor are periods of Russian reasonableness invariably rewarded by more kindly sentiments on the part of the West" (Malia 2000, 7; see also Tsygankov 2019a). Malia concludes that the explanation for such fluctuations resides in conditions within the West (2001, 8). Current fears over populism's power to exploit recent injustices are one such case. Malia's downplaying of Russian aggression looks naive in the light of the Ukraine war, yet the dynamic he identifies remained salient to that context (see chapter 9).

Deutsche Welle illustrated the dynamic in an article claiming that the "Kremlin media … undermine democratic processes in Europe using a new form of expansive digital authoritarianism" (Mannteufel 2019). The article reflected "the fears and frustrations" among European elites regarding issues facing the EU, from the rise of populism to migration, but failed to substantiate its claim that Russian propaganda exacerbates these issues. The sources it cited instead confirmed Russia's minimal impact on Western media audiences.[1] The proliferation of such narratives indicates, as Malia suggests, that unfounded perceptions of Russian antagonism acquire their own momentum, shaping the Russia-West relationship to provide retrospective justification for those perceptions (Malia 2000, 5).

The perceptions are mutually reinforcing. Rather than merely a cynical mirroring tactic designed to demonstrate Western bad faith, RT's obsession with identifying European breaches of media freedom projects onto its antagonists the restraints on free expression characterizing Putin's own actions. As Borenstein (2019, 100) notes: "The discourse of Russophobia locks Russia into a dyad with the perceived enemy, displacing actions attributed initially to one party as a shared characteristic of both."

RT navigates through the conflicting missions imposed upon it by the reciprocity dynamic via a sleight of hand. During EU2019, this led it to locate its Russianness in its very non-Russianness. Its obsessive rebuttal of the MSM jibes that it is a Kremlin tool, and its implicit claim that the true Russia is absent, above the fray, aligns it with all those who, like Russia, are marginalized by hegemonic liberal establishments (conservative nationalists; antiglobalist leftists; migrants; an unnamed, inclusive transnational "people"). It is Russian precisely because it is an alternative broadcaster of counterhegemonic disposition and "low" vernacular status, with foreign staff and allegiances to non-Russian, anti-MSM, pseudo-democratizing actors. It is authentically Russian, too, owing to its refusal of the stereotype imposed upon it, and its transgressive exposure of that stereotype's falsity. These postures acquired new potency from the radical reorientation forced on RT by the events of 2022.

The assumption by RT of Russia's place in the identity dynamic emboldens it to allege that hysterical accusations of Russian interference mask the true problems besetting liberal democracies; in becoming the false meaning, or all-encompassing symptom, of those

problems, the Russia targeted by Russophobes provides an unspoken rallying point for all affected by them. This function accounted for the RT English article eviscerating Verhofstadt's claims that the elections are "either a vote for Europe, or for Russia." Seen in the light of the connection that Borenstein (2019, 100) makes between Russophobia discourse, "the national renegotiation of the country's selfhood in the wake of the Soviet Union's destruction," and the "fetishized sovereignty of Putin's era," the foregrounding of Russophobia within RT's engagement with populist logic intersects with its endorsement of Le Pen's sovereigntist xenophobia. RT's role was aided by its ambiguous status as inside yet outside its operating environments; it is at ease within local populist styles yet avoids convergence with them. This equates to its self-legitimation needs on one hand and its uniform self-abasement and manufactured victimhood on the other. Its contortions are those of a tapeworm-like Moebius strip, whose inside twists to become its outside. For RT's adversaries, they are the repulsive movements of an alien presence that has burrowed inside the European self to feed parasitically on its blood and waste. The excision of that worm in 2022 proved inconclusive, owing as much to persistent fallibilities in the liberal body politic as to the stubborn durability of the parasite it strove to eject.

Such imagery prompts questions concerning RT and the master narrative of Russian electoral interference: that of the Kremlin's purported role in the 2016 US presidential election when the archpopulist Donald Trump stormed the liberal citadel of a major Western power. The storming metaphor became reality in Trump's efforts to overturn his 2020 defeat. While the broadcast arms of RT UK and RT France steered cautiously through Trump's quagmire of falsehoods, RT America and the web-based output of RT International feasted on the wounds that those falsehoods exposed (over 40 percent of America's electorate endorsed Trump's fraud allegations; Yang 2022). Along with the US alt-right media, they amplified such allegations via the "deep state" conspiracy theories underpinning the pro-Trump populist narrative (Tolz 2020a; Tolz and Kazakov 2020).

The contrast in RT's approach to the 2020 US election and EU2019 reflects the different stages reached by the respective populist insurgencies and the divergent relevance of the identity dynamic. Far from representing marginal voices, US populist assaults on democratic values infiltrated the mainstream; the electoral process here was now threatened not by foreign actors but by half of a political duopoly. This situation presented an unprecedented opportunity for RT, allowing it to camouflage its disruptive activities beneath those of a wide spectrum of endogenous actors including Fox News, which echoed Kremlin claims of Russophobia during the Ukraine war. Ultimately, uniformly applied information war and disinformation narratives obscured RT's modes of self-assimilation to local environments. For EU2019, this process entailed adapting the Russia-Europe identity dynamic to the pariah status accorded to it by its adversaries and combining this gesture with a populist logic strengthened by the fracturing of Europe's liberal consensus. The dynamic acquired radically new features in 2022.

5

MEDIATIZATION AND THE SALISBURY POISONINGS

We now turn our attention to circumstances when, in the prewar period, "normal politics" was replaced by a system of "manual control," as seen in a coordinated informational campaign around events in which Russia's central role elicited wide international condemnation. Within the campaign, Russian state-affiliated media were expected to assist the Kremlin with its denials of Russia's culpability for a blatantly illegal action, despite mounting evidence for it. The failure of the Kremlin's informational campaign discussed in this chapter can be seen as a precursor of the failures of Russia's political communication efforts within the infosphere dominated by the Western mainstream media (MSM) during the war on Ukraine.

On March 4, 2018, the Russian British double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found slumped on a bench in Salisbury. Eight days later, the British prime minister Theresa May announced that it was "highly likely that Russia was responsible" for poisoning the Skripals using a nerve agent, in "an indiscriminate and reckless act" (BBC 2018). As one BBC journalist noted, her statement "sounded like … if not a prelude to war, certainly like the onset of a serious international crisis" (Urban 2018, 248). The poisonings, which later took the life of a local resident, Dawn Sturgess, produced contradictory statements from state-affiliated actors on both sides, as the United Kingdom and Russia promoted their preferred narratives. In September 2018, closed-circuit television footage emerged of two Russian suspects later identified through open-source journalism as Russian Chief Intelligence Directorate (GRU) agents. RT was the outlet supposedly chosen by the suspects to deny their guilt.

The battle between state-affiliated Russian and dominant Western narratives that played out in the media appeared to be a perfect example of information war at first glance. The eventual unraveling of the Russian state narrative of the Salisbury poisonings, and the specific role of RT within this process, however, bring into question how effectively the Russian state is able to manipulate current global connectivities to its own advantage. As discussed in chapter 1, the emphasis on Russia's effectiveness has been an important tenet of information war literature, whose expectation tended to be that publics respond to the Kremlin's message as intended (McIntosh 2015, 299; Paul and Matthews 2016; see also Mejias and Vokuev 2017, 1032; Pomerantsev 2015).[1] The Salisbury poisonings did not corroborate this assumption.

A key weakness of the information-war account is the absence of any recognition of the transformative effects of mediatization. As discussed earlier, the term highlights the pervasive presence of the media in every aspect of people's lives today, distinguishing itself from the older phenomenon of mediation when the media was the most important source of information and channel of communication between governments and citizens (Strömbäck 2008, 229–31). At the current stage of mediatization, state-affiliated broadcasters, including those within nondemocratic regimes, operate among a wider range of actors, communicating a range of opinions in record speed through digital media technologies (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010). Cases in which such alignments have effectively supported state-endorsed narratives have been the focus of most research into Russian media collaborations with different news and (dis)information providers. Diverse information creators can also pose major challenges to these narratives.

This chapter assesses the impact of mediatization on the ability of Russian state actors, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to mount effective informational campaigns promoting the Kremlin-preferred line during international crises with Russia at their center. The questions it poses are as follows: How did mediatization shape Russia's state-media-public relationship in the prewar period? What role did participatory online audiences play in this process? What did the mediatization of politics mean for the agency of individual journalists and for Russian news making around issues of high sensitivity to the Kremlin? In addressing these questions, we also compare RT's reporting strategies (targeting international audiences) to those of Russia's domestic state-affiliated broadcasters. Our analysis adds new complexity to our arguments concerning the facility with which RT adapts populist idioms, some originating in liberal democratic media ecosystems, for authoritarian state purposes, including the obfuscation of Russia's responsibility for actions that elicit wide international critique. It also prepares the ground for our own account of the nature of, motivations for, and responses to the tide of Russian disinformation and state propaganda released after the invasion of Ukraine.

Mediatization Phases and Media Events

The fact that nondemocratic states like Russia are not immune to global mediatization trends is intuited by perceptive scholars and journalists who do not explicitly deploy this concept (Pomerantsev 2013; Galeotti 2018; Guriev and Treisman 2022). It is only since the late 2010s that analyses have emerged of how mediatization plays out in the Russian

context, particularly in relation to the role of audiences and their interaction with traditional media outlets in the production of mediated narratives (Kalinina and Menke 2016; Zassoursky 2016; Bodrunova, Smoliarova, and Blekanov 2017; Hutchings 2022).

The lacuna is unsurprising. Scholars tend to foreground media independence as a precondition for mediatization (Strömbäck 2008, 233–34), and even promote its potential for deepening democracy (Couldry 2008), whereas most Russian media research focuses on political control.

Under the conditions of mediatization, politics becomes increasingly "dependent in its central functions on mass media" and is "continuously shaped by interactions" with them (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, 205). Strömbäck's theory of mediatization traces four phases in which the balance between political and media logics shapes political communication shifts. At phase 1, the mass media constitute the main communication channel between citizens and politicians. At phase 2 they cease unconditionally communicating the messages preferred by political actors as commercial imperatives assert themselves in a context in which the battle for people's attention takes precedence over traditional journalistic norms and values (Strömbäck 2008, 237–40). At Strömbäck's third phase, political and social actors must adapt to a fully marketized media logic rather than the reverse (2008, 238). In phase 4, "more or less consciously [political actors] allow media logic" and its accompanying commerce-driven standards of newsworthiness to "become a built-in part of the governing process" (Strömbäck 2008, 239–40).

Strömbäck was writing before social media had become a central driver for the mediatization of not just politics but everyday life. Accounting for this further development prompts us to suggest that we are currently witnessing the fifth phase of mediatization, captured as part of what Couldry and Hepp (2017, 7, 34) call "deep mediatization." At this most current phase, social media, on the one hand, allow citizens to wield new political influencing power. On the other hand, politicians are able to circumvent conventional media channels to communicate directly with citizens, encouraging the spread of mediated populism across most societies. As was the case with all prior stages of mediatization, phase 5 contains both opportunities and challenges for political and media establishments.

The case of Russia shows that even when political control over influential media (e.g., broadcasters) remains much higher than Strömbäck suggests in his democracy-based description, the existence of an at least partially free internet, social media, and citizen access to oppositional and foreign news outlets means that nondemocratic politicians must adapt to the ever-increasing mediatization of politics, including its latest phases 4 and 5. Social media provide authoritarian leaders new scope to influence public opinion in both overt and covert ways (e.g., popularizing Putin by creating his celebrity status via social media or using state-sponsored trolls and bots to reinforce state narratives and intimidate opponents). They also, however, provide a crucial public space for challenging authoritarian leaders and their narratives. Digitally empowered audiences increasingly evade control as ordinary citizens become media actors, and the content of online communications is impossible to subject to comprehensive censorship—an issue we have been reminded of in the context of the Ukraine war. State-sponsored journalists, meanwhile, are drawn ever more into the orbit of commercial and professional imperatives that do not always coincide precisely with the needs of the state. They also must take into account the ability of "citizen journalists" to undercut state-endorsed narratives.

Despite the constraints, nondemocratic politicians attempt to harness mediatization to

their advantage—for example, by instrumentally using new media technologies to flood online space with contradictory messages so that audiences are confused as to what narrative to believe. Importantly, Strömbäck (2008, 239) distinguishes phase 3, when politicians, like Putin, still perceive media as "a strategic tool" external to them, from phase 4, when they "internalize" media logic that "colonizes" politics and when instrumentalization breaks down under the weight of self-contradiction. The limits of instrumentalization become even more apparent in phase 5. Equally important is Strömbäck's recognition that several phases may be in operation simultaneously and that "different institutional actors in a society" may attain "different phases" at any one time (2008, 241). This seems to describe the situation pertaining in Putin's Russia at the time the Salisbury drama was unfolding, so Strömbäck's model, updated in order to account for the specific role of social media, informs our analysis.

Assertions that belief in the power of "mediated realities" encouraged the Kremlin and "its media machine" to dispense with facts altogether (Pomerantsev 2015), even outside the emergency context of war, are implausible. It was one thing for the Kremlin to covertly use websites of uncertain provenance, bots and trolls whose real identities are hidden in order to systematically disseminate fabricated stories. This approach was not an option for state-affiliated broadcasters if they wanted to meet market objectives and maintain or expand audiences, however. Even if broad journalistic autonomy—the "latitude journalists have within the operational routines of reporting" (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, 135)—was limited, journalists who had higher positions in the institutional hierarchy or were star presenters were able to exercise agency by making important editorial choices in the coverage of specific stories. As our analysis shows, Russian broadcasters felt the need to maintain some credibility, keeping their narratives believable and thus "sellable." For the likes of RT, whose audiences have access to a wide range of sources, this has been particularly important, hence its greater leeway in making editorial decisions than was (and still is) the case with domestic Russian broadcasters.

In discussing the concept of credibility in the media, defined as news needing "not just [to] be seen" but "believed," Vultee (2010, 14) argues that credibility (or believability) is "constructed between journalists and audiences." It is therefore a relational, context-specific concept. Journalists are aware of this, and when audiences clearly signal skepticism about a particular narrative, a response strategy is designed to preserve audience loyalty and market shares. In phase 5 of mediatization, the audiences' capacity for signaling their assessment of the credibility of journalistic accounts is particularly high. Thus, mediatization facilitates two related, but sometimes conflictual, forms of enhanced journalistic agency: the agency afforded to reporters by state sponsors adopting phase 3 strategic media-instrumentalization logics and that necessitated by the internalization of commercial media demands for the believability and competitiveness characteristic of phases 4 and 5. The tensions generated when these two forms of agency clash, which in phase 5 happens ever more frequently, form a key component of this chapter's analysis.

State-led missions to harness mediatization are particularly prone to be compromised in the context of the multiactor, global reach of "media events," which blur boundaries between major news stories and their mediations. Media event theory originally referred to the closely managed coproduction and oversaturation by states and media of ritual occasions and was expanded to include "disruptive" events like terror attacks or natural disasters to acknowledge the fact that media events reveal political cleavages as much as

shared values (Dayan and Katz 1994; Katz and Liebes 2007; Hepp and Couldry 2010). Within an increasingly networked communications environment, the role of audiences as coproducers of media events grows, diminishing the controlling influence of individual states and the dominance of their preferred narratives (Hepp and Couldry 2010, 24). Therefore, state-affiliated media no longer operate as mere tools to maintain state power or negate temporary challenges to it arising from unanticipated disruptions, and the success of state-preferred narratives becomes uncertain.

Domestically, in the decade preceding the full-scale war on Ukraine, Russian state-sponsored broadcasters attempted to limit this uncertainty while exploiting public interest in disruptive media events by repackaging long-existing problems as new, disruptive occurrences whose sudden but preplanned oversaturated coverage made them easier to strategically manage (Tolz and Teper 2018). But what happens if a *genuinely unexpected* disturbance to Russian state equilibrium occurs, triggering oversaturated coverage within a global system with internalized mediatization logics at whose heart RT aspires to operate? The Salisbury incident and the United Kingdom's reactions to it were just such a disturbance.

Case Selection and Methods

Narratives of security inevitably dominated the transnational media event that developed around the Salisbury poisonings. Derived from a war context, securitizing narratives claim to identify an existential threat to a particular object and demand rule-breaking approaches to dealing with that threat (Waever 2011). In security matters state actors play a crucial role because they deploy emergency powers and attempt to exert control over the message communicated to citizens. Yet citizens must be convinced of the need for such an emergency response, rendering the media framing of the chosen issue critical to securitization (Gillespie 2007, 275). Russian state reliance on media articulations of its preferred message, and, crucially, the impact of this message on audiences, is thus particularly exposed in the context of security-related media events. Mediatization works hand in hand with burgeoning security discourses, just as it converges with dominant market logics. The fact that the Salisbury poisonings occurred at this three-way intersection makes them a particularly instructive case study.

In order to highlight RT's specific responses to a disruptive media event of direct concern to the Kremlin, RT International's coverage will be compared to that of Channel 1. Alongside RT, this domestic broadcaster was allotted a key role in disseminating Kremlin-preferred interpretations of the Salisbury poisonings. We deploy a socionarrative approach to the news making dynamics of the Salisbury media event, focusing on how the narratives that drive interstate conflicts playing out across the global mediasphere are coconstructed by media and state actors, as well as audiences, through "processes of collaboration, consensus and coercion" (Harding 2012, 292).

The analysis in this chapter incorporates daily news bulletins from RT and Channel 1 in the three-day spans around thirteen major developments (table 5.1), plus analyses of web stories published within three-day spans of seven of these (indicated in bold).[2] We also analyzed all the broadcasters' relevant current affairs broadcasts across the analysis period

(using the search terms "Skripal" and "Novichok"). We interrogated audience responses by analyzing over six hundred comments to a selection of videos that these broadcasters uploaded to YouTube around key developments in the case, focusing particularly on responses to RT's interview with the suspects. Here we collected comments within the first two hours following the video upload during which, for some reason, RT did not switch off the comments section. There was little sign of state-affiliated bot or troll manipulation since the overwhelming majority of comments were utterly disdainful of RT and of the Kremlin. Comments were coded inductively according to their main themes, which arose from a collaborative analysis of social media comments (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2018).

DATE	STONES
March 5, 2018	**Wiltshire police declare a major incident; Metropolitan police announce a "nerve agent" used**
March 12, 2018	**May gives Russia deadline of March 14, 2018**
March 15, 2018	**France, UK, US issue joint statement**
March 17, 2018	**Russia expels twenty-three UK diplomats; OPCW starts testing substance**
April 5, 2018	**Russia expels twenty-three UK diplomats**
April 7, 2018	**Yulia Skripal and Yulia Skripal phone calls**
May 9, 2018	**Yulia Skripal discharged from hospital**
May 23, 2018	**OPCW preliminary report released**
June 14, 2018	**Yulia Skripal video statement**
July 5, 2018	**Reports of Amesbury Novichok poisoning**
September 5, 2018	**British police charge two suspects**
September 11, 2018	**RT interview with suspects**
September 13, 2018	**Bellingcat reveal Boshirov is GRU agent**
October 8, 2018	**Bellingcat reveal Petrov as GRU doctor**

TABLE 5.1. Salisbury media event chronology and analysis periods

The Power of Media Logic

The initial framing of the Salisbury incident by both Russia and the United Kingdom was as a major security threat. While the UK foreign secretary described the poisonings as the first use of chemical weapons on European soil since World War II (Johnson 2018), his Russian counterpart accused Britain of attempting to destabilize the international order, and Channel 1 reporters called the United Kingdom's position a "declaration of war" (*Vremya pokazhet*, March 7, 2018; March 13, 2018). For both sides such framings were politically expedient. In Russia the presidential election campaign was underway, and claims about heightened security threats and Western Russophobia could potentially bolster Putin's position. For the United Kingdom, the incident helped burnish the prestige of a government tarnished by its handling of Brexit while enhancing cooperation with the European Union.

During the six months from the first announcement of the poisoning to the release of images of the suspects, however, an information vacuum occurred at the heart of the event (Dejevsky 2018). As the Russian government denied responsibility, it, too, obviously refrained from providing Russian media with specific information. The UK government and intelligence services occasionally drip-fed insights. As a result, the incident turned into a media-driven interpretation hot spot rife with speculation, rumor, and conspiracy theories. This confusion rendered the crisis a classic example of mediatized foreign policy

making (Esser and Strömbäck 2014, 13–19), for which traditional approaches based on "principled deliberation" were rejected in favor of media logic, with its focus on the unique and the sensational and on journalists' role in shaping the public discourse.

Russian broadcasters adopted three broad approaches derived from the affordances of the mediatized public sphere: mediacentricity, a mirroring effect, and a metalevel subversion of the very conventions of public engagement with international disputes. Rather than attempting to win a long-term battle of ideologically driven narratives as during the Cold War, state-affiliated media outlets operating under conditions of heightened mediatization sought short-term gains related to the traction of individual stories within the hybrid media system. This accorded Russian journalists additional levels of agency, as interpretative frames were coproduced by broadcasters and the Russian Foreign Ministry in accordance with their ability to grab the attention of media audiences.

Mediacentricity

Media-centricity—focusing coverage of a story on its treatment by other media outlets and bringing outlets or journalists themselves to the forefront of the story—was a key feature throughout the Salisbury crisis. Actions by both states were consistently taken with their subsequent mediation in mind, such as the Russian state–sanctioned telephone conversations between Yulia Skripal and her cousin Viktoria, Yulia's video interview facilitated by British intelligence, and the hoax telephone call to Boris Johnson by Kremlin-associated pranksters.

Russian broadcasters began covering Salisbury two days after the first reports in the UK media; RT's and Channel 1's initial reactions on March 6, 2018, were limited to summaries of BBC News coverage (RT News, March 6, 2018; *Vremya*, March 6, 2018). Much subsequent Russian coverage continued to amount to cross-reporting and critiquing UK (and other Western) media narratives. Virtually every Channel 1 talk show from March to September started with a critical survey of UK media. RT reporters argued that the poisoning was a media-driven story in which media speculations had no bearing on what actually happened. On March 12, an RT reporter introduced a new frame, "media frenzy": "Amid the media frenzy over the poisoning … the attacks today are discussed at the very highest level in Britain" (RT News, March 12, 2018). The same day, on Channel 1's evening news program *Vremya*, the Russian presidential spokesman also mentioned "UK media frenzy," contrasting "hysterical" Britain and calm, rational, fact-seeking Russia. The media-centricity was regularly visualized through screenshotted UK news headlines on RT and Channel 1 studio screens. The constant dearth of new developments in the case made such media-centricity even more inevitable.

Media outlets and individual journalists themselves were inexorably sucked into the drama, with a rapidity and in a manner over which states exercised limited control, demonstrating that the affordances of phase 4 mediatization readily mutate into hazards. Thus, RT was extensively forced to cover UK regulator Ofcom's investigation into its alleged impartiality breaches during the Salisbury crisis, as well as British MP's attacks on it as Putin's "propaganda network" (RT News, April 18, 2018; July 5, 2018). On March 7, 2018, Channel 1's news anchor was drawn involuntarily into a global media story when he opened the main news bulletin with a veiled warning to anyone who contemplated

betraying Russia (*Vremya*, March 7, 2018). This was splashed across Western media, prompting the anchor to later report sardonically on his unexpected status as an international "celebrity" (*Vremya*, March 12, 2018).

The Mirroring Effect

Media-centricity transforms narratives into reverse mirror images of one another (Hutchings and Miazhevich 2009). This was particularly evident on the Russian side, as broadcasters systematically inverted the meanings of British accounts. For example, the murders of Russian defectors in the United Kingdom, regularly referred to by British outlets, were repeatedly cited with ironic undertones by RT and Channel 1 as they strove to neutralize their implications regarding Russia's Salisbury narratives. The Russian broadcasters acknowledged potentially Russia-incriminating elements in the British accounts, simultaneously refuting their connection to the Russian state and according the accounts "Russophobic" meaning (*Vremya* and *Vremya pokazhet*, March 7, 2018; *Worlds Apart*, April 1, 2018). Such responses were hastily improvised to bolster narratives whose rapid global remediation and constant need for recalibration reflected the profoundly mediatized environment that generated them. It is this need to constantly recalibrate their claims within the globally networked and highly dialogical mediasphere that leads RT and other Russian media actors to produce multiple, and inevitably often contradictory, accounts of specific developments.

The most important mirroring narrative centered on mutual claims that the mediated reality created by reporting on the Salisbury poisonings had no bearing on objective reality. UK media persistently leveled this accusation against Russian outlets (Harding 2018), which applied it in turn to UK and other Western media. An RT journalist adopted this line in the channel's very first Salisbury report. "It is remarkable that with so few facts, the mystery of what's made Sergei Skripal ill has captured the hearts and minds of journalists in the UK" (RT News, March 6, 2018). Channel 1, which delayed the start of its detailed Salisbury coverage, first articulated this narrative a week after the incident, with *Vremya*'s anchor claiming "This is a noisy campaign which appears to be specifically organized for [UK] newspapers and television" (March 11, 2018). The same day, the Russian Foreign Ministry made a similar assertion: "We have not received a single piece of evidence. Instead, we are just watching reports on [UK] television" (quoted on *Vremya*, March 11, 2018). Putin himself asserted that he "found out about it [the poisoning] only from the mass media" (*Vremya*, March 19, 2018).

In another gesture characteristic of a fully mediatized operating environment, *Vremya*'s anchor exhibited an intuitive meta-level grasp of media logic's market imperatives, asking of the *Sun*'s Salisbury coverage: "Is this a tabloid newspaper method to increase sales?" (July 4, 2018). An RT reporter, meanwhile, commented: "You can see why it's a big story. It's got all the hallmarks of a Le Carré spy novel" (RT News, March 6, 2019). To reinforce the narrative of UK media's market-driven construction of a fake, mediated reality, Russian broadcasters frequently invoked a SKY TV spy thriller, *Strike Back*, featuring a standoff between British and Russian agents. RT and Channel 1 incorporated clips from the thriller into news reports, buttressing their claims that accusations against Russia were media fakery (RT News, March 18, 2018; *Pust govoryat*, April 5, 2018). The most self-consciously

provocative reverse mirroring of UK media coverage was a Channel 1 talk show participant's claim that these actions reflected a mediated reality whose production was tightly controlled by British politicians. "I want to tell the viewers … do not think that there is media freedom in the UK. All newspapers cover the story in the same way. This can never happen by itself. [Their] press is tightly controlled by politicians" (*Pust govoryat*, April 5, 2018).

Redefining the Rules of the Game

The tendency to subvert the adversary's media discourse through metalevel intuitions of its logics and conventions is characteristic of phase 3 strategic approaches to mediatization, as in Russian broadcaster engagement with UK tabloid media. BBC World News's *Beyond 100 Days* program, which is more tabloid in its sensibilities than news broadcasts on BBC 1 and whose intensely commercialized operating environment sometimes prompted departures from strict BBC impartiality norms, was occasionally included in critical surveys of Western coverage. Most references, however, were to tabloids like *MailOnline*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Mirror*. This is in part because their engagement in wild speculations offered a clearer target and in part because of Russian broadcasters' greater affinity with UK tabloid irreverence than with BBC propriety.

After the first two days, engagement with the BBC was restricted to strategically planned initiatives such as the interviews given by the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova, Putin, Viktoria Skripal, and Simonyan. In contrast, in their daily output RT and Channel 1 mounted a sustained dialogical and hyperirreverent confrontation with the UK tabloids, and it is here that Russia began to attempt to subvert the rules by which political and diplomatic crises are normally discussed. The approach baffled UK politicians and journalists; on the BBC's *Newsnight*, Evan Davis began asking perplexedly of the Russian refusal to adopt an appropriate tone, "Why are they not taking it seriously? What is their game?" (April 6, 2018). Russia's strategy, however, matched RT's long-term self-positioning as an alternative to the MSM not only in content (its reporting of neglected stories) but also in style (its adoption of the colloquial register and of the mocking humor associated with tabloids and social media).

RT journalists used their well-honed skills to lead the Russian state's discursive response to UK accusations. Operating in an Ofcom-regulated environment, RT was more circumspect than Channel 1 when explicitly apportioning the blame for the poisonings to actors other than Russia. On Channel 1, its own reporters systematically blamed UK, US, and Ukrainian politicians or intelligence services for the attack (*Vremya*, April 5, 2018, July 4, 2018; *Vremya pokazhet*, March 12, 2018). On RT this provocative indulgence was usually the remit of invited guests (Birge and Chatterje-Doody 2021). Instead, RT used three of its common devices. The first was overarching and involved a conspiratorial metanarrative of a cover-up by the Western establishment (Birge and Chatterje-Doody 2021). This was buttressed by two specific strategies. One was to report correctly actual statements by reputable Western sources and actors about the lack of evidence regarding specific details of the discussed case while interpreting these statements as if they refuted the case as a whole. For example, RT presented a statement by the Metropolitan police that it would be very difficult to offer proof of Putin's direct involvement in ordering Skripal's assassination

as a general admission of a lack of any evidence for Russia's culpability (RT 2019e). Second, mocking sarcasm toward accusations against Russia adopted as the discursive propriety associated with phase 3 mediatization gave way to practices associated with the more unruly, hypernetworked media environment characteristic of phases 4 and 5.

RT's irreverence, a typical element within the populist stylistic repertoire, intensified in the third of our identified periods (March 17, 2018–March 19, 2018), which followed the expulsion of Russian diplomats. Coverage contained preprepared entertainment packages that included bizarre emojis seemingly contrived to manipulate audiences' emotive responses to Salisbury (RT News, March 18, 2018). Humorous stories about businesses' bad-taste attempts to market Novichok-themed products appeared as items on RT's website between April and July (RT 2018b, 2018d, 2018g). RT gave headline billing to a hoax phone call to the UK foreign minister Boris Johnson during the Salisbury crisis, in which Kremlin-friendly Russian pranksters, Lexus and Vovan, posed as Armenia's prime minister (RT 2018f).

Both RT and Channel 1 strove to mobilize digital tools to their advantage by selectively citing tweets, Facebook, and blog posts that chimed with the Russian position, even though, from the early stages, opinion polls in the United Kingdom indicated high levels of blame for Russia (Folwell 2018). In apparent coordination with the Russian Foreign Ministry, RT began using hashtags in its Twitter communications that mocked the UK position, such as #Russiadidit and #highlylikely, adopted by Foreign Minister Lavrov on the same day (RT News, March 16, 2018). This illustrates the subordination of political to media logic as envisaged at mediatization phase 3, which still permits politicians to reassert a degree of control.

Indeed, speaking on the BBC, several political observers watching the "battle of narratives" around the Salisbury poisonings claimed that the Russians put the United Kingdom on the "back foot" (BBC News, April 5, 2018). The *Newsnight* moderator argued: "Information seems to come out of the British only after it's been raised by the Russians. If it is a propaganda war, it's not felt as though the British are winning." A leading political analyst participating in the same program agreed that Russian propaganda is played "like an orchestra.… They are really good at it" (April 6, 2018). This widely held view was shattered, however, thanks to the roles of nonstate actors and audiences in the coproduction of media events—a quintessentially phase 4 and 5 mediatization phenomenon.

Digital (Mis)Appropriations, Nonstate Actors, and Unreliable Audiences

Much scholarship has focused on how Russian digital media users unwittingly reinforce Kremlin-preferred narratives (Gaufman 2015; Mejias and Vokuev 2017; Szostek 2018b). This trend dominated the early stages of the Skripal story. Later developments, however, demonstrated the limits of any state's ability to impose its preferred narratives on audiences. Although online audience commentators and Twitter users lend themselves to selective quotation and manipulation, these actors are not always pliable and can directly threaten mainstream broadcaster narratives. The complex assemblages of actors operating

within the hybrid media environment can both enhance and challenge the predominance of state-preferred narratives, accelerating the diffusion of agency and creating alternative centers of power offering only transient opportunities for state co-option (Chadwick 2013). As the last stage of the Salisbury-poisoning story demonstrates, this presents heightened dangers to nondemocratic governments.

A complex interbraiding of domestic and international allegiances and audiences informed RT's interview with the Salisbury suspects. The Kremlin's initial concern was to keep domestic audiences onside, with its hedged account attributing blame to British intelligence or to other foreign actors. In turn RT offered more nuanced versions of counteraccusations than those aired on domestic television. Initially, RT's English-speaking audiences seemed to endorse the Russian line: the sixty videos on RT's YouTube "Skripal" playlist were viewed more than 1.6 million times, receiving thirty-two thousand upvotes compared to forty-two hundred downvotes. On one video, 73 percent of audience comments referred to a British state conspiracy (*CrossTalk*, March 13, 2018). Comments on audience forums can be manipulated, of course, and the impact of Russian trolls and bots on those has been widely discussed elsewhere (Jamieson 2018). Coordinated Russia-sponsored interventions in these forums, however, might not be as comprehensive, let alone as efficient, as is often surmised. RT's handling of online reactions to its interview with the Salisbury poisoning suspects offers a compelling example.

On September 5, 2018, the UK media reported the identification via CCTV images of two suspects traveling as "Ruslan Boshirov" and "Aleksandr Petrov"—whom UK and Russian open-source investigative journalists proved several months later to be Russian military intelligence agents (Tolz 2018). The timing of the closed-circuit television images' release, like that of the Yulia Skripal video, reconfirmed the British security services' influential media management role. A week after their announcement as suspects, Putin announced that Petrov and Boshirov were private citizens, had been found, and should contact the Russian media. In an overt example of its collaboration with the Russian intelligence services, RT released a YouTube video interview on September 13, available simultaneously in Russian and with English subtitles (RT 2018c, 2018h). Simonyan conducted the interview. The interviewees' answers to Simonyan's questions elicited universal contempt. Seventy-four percent of comments analyzed in response to RT's English-language YouTube video of the interview challenged the suspects' claims. Some English-speaking viewers stated that the interview had changed their opinion of the whole affair: "Not a very convincing interview at all … I wasn't doubting the Russian government until I saw this interview."

The interview also failed with Russian domestic and broader Russophone audiences, vitiating RT's reputation as an agile instrument of the Russian state. In an implicit acknowledgment that it was now impossible to credibly deny Russia's culpability, Channel 1 allotted minimum coverage to Simonyan's interview and the revelation of the interviewees' true identities. Its talk shows, which in the previous six months had reported on the Salisbury case virtually every day, even in the absence of any specific news, ignored this vital development. Indeed, only 6 percent of the top one hundred comments responding to the Russian-language YouTube interview were explicitly hostile to the United Kingdom, while over 70 percent ridiculed the suspects and/or Russia. Echoing many online comments, one user declared: "Until today I perceived this Skripal story as Britain's provocation. But once I saw these two idiots, my view was shaken." Another aptly observed:

"By posting this video and not disabling comments you've dropped yourselves right in the shit." Such skepticism filtered into audience perceptions of RT, with 19 percent of the Russian-language comments analyzed specifically criticizing the channel or Simonyan. Simonyan's attempts to protect her journalistic identity by signaling her skepticism in relation to some of her interviewees' claims only irritated audiences, who saw her contorted attempts at distancing herself from the subject as a sign of her deep hypocrisy.

As the interview debacle indicates, online communities and citizen journalists can assume disproportionate importance to national broadcasters, forming complex assemblages with them and compounding their anxieties over their precarious hold on their most committed audiences. Following the disintegration of the state-endorsed narrative, Putin was forced to alter his own messaging protesting Russia's innocence, as he branded Skripal a treacherous scumbag (*podonok*) undeserving of concern (*Financial Times* 2018). RT's continued use of mocking sarcasm barely improved the credibility of its collapsed narrative with audiences. For example, RT (2018e) claimed that the interview's main damage was to Salisbury's image as a tourist destination and its sale of T-shirts bearing inscriptions derived from Simonyan's exchanges with the suspects. This effort to co-opt and draw attention to the sting of the irreverent mockery to which RT had itself fallen victim backfired. Phase 5 mediatization cultures prove resistant to state appropriation.

The incident underscores a dilemma faced by all states and journalists operating within the latest phases of mediatization. On one hand, the greater the information gaps created by the withholding or slow release of key facts during media events, the more control states exert over their favored broadcasters. Moreover, temporary alignments with one or more of the multitude of nonstate media actors now populating the hypernetworked mediasphere can authenticate the narrative preferences of the states involved (Russia's with Lexus and Vovan embarrassing the UK foreign secretary; the United Kingdom's, via Bellingcat's, exposure of the suspects' identities). Yet because broadcasters now act within that same environment, the larger the information gaps, the greater the likelihood that other diverse actors will fill them with revelations or speculations liable to divert state narratives.

Mediatization and Journalistic Agency

As mediatization progresses, more tension arises between the political logic of the state actors striving to appropriate it and the increasingly commerce-driven media logic that journalists of all hues are obliged to follow. This was not, however, immediately apparent in Russia's strictly managed approach to the Salisbury incident. Regardless of what individual Russian journalists personally thought, they were compelled to embrace the official narrative denying Russia's culpability. Yet a closer look reveals different levels of agency accorded to RT and Channel 1 journalists, with the agency of the former being more extensive than of the latter. This distinction holds good, albeit in reduced form, even in the extreme circumstances of Russia's ferociously condemned invasion of Ukraine. Channel 1 took almost a week to report on the Salisbury case in significant detail. Throughout the incident, Channel 1's journalists directly blamed actors other than Russia, all polemically and systematically endorsing the Russian Foreign Ministry's line. A covert example of

journalistic agency was apparent in Channel 1's decision to cease coverage abruptly once Simonyan's interview had backfired.[3] This was in contrast to Russia's fully state-owned channel Rossiya, which continued its assertions of Russian innocence throughout the rest of September (*60 minut*, September 13, 2018; *Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evym*, September 1, 2018; Rossiya 24 Novosti, September 17, 2018).

RT, however, operates in a different legislative-commercial environment from Channel 1. It competes for audiences as part of a wide package of international media outlets, including, until 2022, the Western MSM, and RT management is acutely aware of its audiences' media consumption habits (Seddon 2016). For this reason it provided detailed accounts of the unfolding events more promptly than Channel 1, a phenomenon we also saw in the early days of the war in Ukraine (see chapter 8). Moreover, even though the channel was sanctioned by Ofcom for breaches of impartiality, RT's journalists tended to avoid directly assigning blame to the United Kingdom or other non-Russian actors. Instead, such assertions were usually delegated to external interviewees. RT was also highly proactive in framing the official Russian position and attempting to undermine the credibility of the UK government's claims through its trademark sarcastic humor rather than through direct accusations of lying against UK officials.

Intuiting the need to protect their professional credibility in a media environment dominated by narratives hostile to Russia, certain RT journalists were far bolder than their domestic counterparts in signaling ambiguity toward official narratives. In her interview with the father of the assassinated Russian defector Aleksandr Litvinenko, Oksana Boyko, RT's star presenter, explicitly invoked evidence pointing to Russia's responsibility for the assassination. She challenged Walter Litvinenko's assertions that his son was killed by US intelligence services (Worlds Apart, April 1, 2018), bolstering that challenge via a visual performance of skepticism regarding her interviewee and a studied distance toward the official Kremlin script for her task in bringing him to the attention of Anglophone audiences. In a context where Western media constantly linked the Litvinenko and Skripal cases, Boyko's hedged challenge to Walter Litvinenko's assertions had implications for her interpretation of the Salisbury poisonings. Significantly, Ofcom found no impartiality breach in Boyko's interview, which contrasted with Litvinenko's appearance on Channel 1, where his claims were unquestioningly endorsed (*Pust govoryat*, April 5, 2018). When appearing on UK media, RT journalists distanced themselves from the Russian line still further. Facing a hostile panel and studio audience on BBC *Question Time* (March 15, 2018), the RT journalist Afshin Rattansi openly acknowledged the possibility that the Kremlin ordered the poisoning (also reported by RT 2018a).

Like Boyko, Simonyan used verbal tone and facial expression to relay her skepticism about her interviewees' claims. When asked about her interview with the suspects on Channel 1's *Vremya*, she refused to confirm that she believed them, insisting that "as a journalist I only believe what I see myself" (*Vremya*, September 13, 2018). On the day of the interview, she further attempted to reperform her identity as an inquisitive, truth-seeking journalist in a BBC *Newsnight* phone interview (September 13, 2018). She dramatically hung up, however, when the presenter, Kirsty Wark, questioned RT's status as a professional media organization. Simonyan's angry exit appeared to be motivated less by Wark's sudden aggression (Simonyan is accustomed to rebutting Western criticism of RT) than by how this tactic undercut her performance of an identity she presumed to share with a fellow professional.

These examples suggest that Russian broadcasters displayed distance from the Kremlin-sponsored narrative at the point when the credibility of their outlets and/or specific journalists were overtly at stake. RT followed media logic's commercial imperatives to a greater degree than its domestic counterparts, recognizing that without examples of credible journalism its already modest audience would be eroded. In the prewar context, its star presenters enjoyed a degree of editorial autonomy not normally associated with it. The degree of agency available to journalists traditionally depends on their positions in the organizational hierarchy (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). Thus, Simonyan is RT's editor in chief. The examples of Boyko, a high-profile presenter, Rattansi, who worked for the BBC and CNN and was entrusted to represent RT when it was invited to appear on UK media fora, and the British political satirist Sam Delaney, whose alternative comedy reinforced RT's image as a maverick disruptor, indicate that ratings, audience shares, unique selling points, and brand values assume importance alongside bureaucratic rank in the distribution of agency.

The reporting of the Salisbury poisonings appeared to indicate a reversion to classic media event mode; on the Russian side in particular, the incident's heavily securitized context prompted a tightly coordinated collaboration between government and state-aligned television in which journalistic agency was subordinated to political mandates. The choice of Simonyan as the interviewer of the suspects seemingly pointed to the RT editor in chief's links to Russia's intelligence services. And yet closer scrutiny of the mediatized environment in which the Salisbury crisis unfolded reveals that such an account does not fully capture the dynamics of coverage. The growing dominance of media logic and market imperatives within the Russian media system and wider global communications environment complicated the state's efforts to mobilize television outlets for its political and security goals. Moreover, contrary to the stipulations of much mediatization theory (Brommesson and Ekengren 2017, 4), the internalization by political actors of media logic does not require key national media to be independent. Neoauthoritarian states' broadcasters operate within this globally connected environment in which multiple independent media providers and nonstate actors respond differently to the same events and to each other.

Contemporary mediatization accords a growing range of media actors extensive access to digital platforms. This decreases state control of news narratives during security crises like Salisbury, obliging the state to respond to a proliferation of transnational rumors. Combined with the global circulation of news flows facilitated by digitization, this in turn means that media events are effectively coproduced by multiple actors and outlets of diverse provenance, making it impossible for single states to maintain a grip on the narrative trajectories of such events. As chapter 8 will show, the resulting tension came to a head in the desperate and draconian efforts of Kremlin propagandists to assert full control over the "special military operation" narrative designed to obscure the truth about Russia's war on Ukraine and in the frantic, often fantastic, daily rebuttals of global flows of information about the real consequences of that invasion.

When analyzing the far-reaching, contradictory influence of the global media environment on journalistic agency, especially in neoauthoritarian states, we should acknowledge disjunctions between different phases of mediatization. On one hand, states operating within phase 3 mode, like Russia, recognize the value of delegating a degree of agency to preferred broadcasters better placed to exploit the new affordances and logics

offered by social media than government operatives: they continue to perceive the media environment as a strategic tool capable of serving their interests and of informing their own behavior to beneficial effect. Foreign Ministry officials thus internalized RT's metalevel intuition of the rules of conventional media discourse, adopting a tabloid-like, hyperirreverent stance toward them and toward received modes of diplomatic engagement. While this bemused their opponents, it was in keeping with efforts to master populist idioms more commonly associated with peripheral actors within liberal democratic media and political environments.

On the other hand, the accelerated pace and unprecedented reach attained by the circulation of competing narratives compromised the reverse-mirroring strategy, according to which Russian broadcasters strive to utilize media-centricity to their advantage by provocatively inverting the meanings of the attacks on their veracity. This pushes them constantly onto the back foot, pointing to the preponderance of media logic over political logic that is symptomatic of phases 4 and 5. Phase 4, however, also brings with it a second form of enhanced agency specific to state-aligned journalists working within it: that derived from the commercial mandates placed upon international broadcasters. It is this that, at least in part, accounts for the distancing practices adopted by RT journalists required to cleave closely to the Kremlin line, something RT's Channel 1 counterparts did not have to worry about to the same extent since they address Russian domestic audiences who are less exposed to transnational information flows. The dynamics of phase 4 also account for the concern with audience credibility and professional reputation exhibited by RT executives and presenters who, as in the example of Simonyan's hubristic decision to conduct the notorious interview and her equally unwise sortie into BBC terrain, are as liable to derail as to advance state messaging strategies.

Indeed, through its catastrophic interview with the suspects, RT ultimately fell victim to the competing agency of audiences operating within phase 5, whom it wanted to convince of the unreliability of the UK position and who form part of the complex assemblages of media actors rendering the current mediatization process ever more resistant to state co-option. Thus, media events like Salisbury appear to represent a greater risk for neoauthoritarian broadcasters than for their counterparts in democratic states because, in the context of transnational media events, skeptical digitally empowered audiences can ensure that fabricated narratives unravel. The interview's reception by Russophone and international publics confirms this insight, challenging perceptions dominant in liberal democratic narratives about Russia's effectively controlled, hierarchically structured propaganda machine honed for winning the information war.

6

MAPPING RT'S GLOBAL ONLINE AUDIENCES

Viewer reactions to Margarita Simonyan's interview with the Skripal assassination suspects indicate that we cannot assume, as many do, that RT attracts audiences peculiarly ill-equipped to assess media output critically. The Skripal affair, however, including RT's role in it, was only one instance of the widely publicized ineptness of Russian external media/security operations. In this context the status of the scandal caused by Simonyan's interview attracted viewers who do not normally engage with RT. We now shift our full attention to RT audiences and followers, including those for whom RT is part of their daily news diet, as well as intermittent audiences, presenting a broad cross-platform analysis based on quantitative data gathered between 2018 and 2020.

This chapter draws upon an original methodology that analyzes RT's audiences across two of today's most popular social media platforms. We first conduct a computational analysis of the behaviors of 2.6 million followers of RT's main English-language Twitter account (@RT_com) in order to identify their shared interests and identities. We then analyze sixteen of RT's major Facebook pages in multiple languages to understand the popularity of their media content, as well as compare RT's Facebook page content and engagement with those of other international broadcasters in Arabic, Spanish, and English. This analysis encompasses a study of over 2.3 million Facebook posts published up to 2020. These pages were selected for comparison because they had the highest following of all RT's different language output on Facebook. To ascertain changes in RT's audiences and their patterns of engagement after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we conducted a further study of RT's Twitter and Facebook following in October 2022. Our study's cross-platform and longitudinal aspect enables us to contribute new insights into how RT communicates with

its audiences, who its social media audiences are, and how they engage with RT's social media output.

Our study of RT's social media audiences, in terms of reach and engagement across two of the biggest global social media platforms, challenges common assumptions often repeated by Western political and media commentators. Our mixed-method research design allows us to offer a complex picture of the heterogenous profile of RT's Anglophone followers on Twitter, as well as the outlet's ability via Facebook to attract linguistically diverse audiences, with differing results. RT's relative preinvasion success in attracting and engaging Spanish- and Arabic-speaking audiences, mostly from Latin America and the Middle East, is demonstrated by our research on RT's Facebook pages. This helps explain why, despite Western bans on RT, it managed not only to maintain but to increase some of its social media following marginally during the first eight months of the war. Indeed, even before the war Western users constituted only a small minority of RT's audiences. This does not necessarily diminish the efficacy of RT's performative populism, which is neither synonymous with popularity nor dependent on it. Our findings here, alongside those of chapter 7, which focuses specifically on the UK context, point to a divergence of audience views of RT across geopolitical divides. We present our findings with some caution. As with all similar research, the prevalence of bots can easily distort results. And an unusually high proportion of RT's followers, particularly among the most active in terms of engagement, appear not to be genuine. This prevalence of bots is in itself significant, as it sheds light on RT's practices of information manipulation.

Public Perceptions and Earlier Audience Research

Since the 2010s, concerns have been raised about RT's impact on opinions and voting patterns in Western democracies. Claims around this issue have tended to be contradictory. In 2020 the British Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee report on Russian disinformation and influence in the United Kingdom expressed surprise that the UK government failed to take into account how RT may have attempted to influence the British public (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2020, 13–14). This "Russia report" was explicit in stating that RT was one of the central aspects of "Russia's promotion of disinformation and its attempts at broader political influence" (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2020, 9). It provided limited evidence, however, about whom RT purportedly influenced and how exactly this influence occurred. It relegated to a footnote a key comment pointing out that "the direct impact of RT … is tiny.… [At a]ny one time … there is an average of 1,300 people in this country watching RT" and that "in the UK its main impact … is through social media output" (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2020, 9). In contrast, when describing RT's influence and audience, the 2017 US intelligence community report on Russian interference in the 2016 election uncritically reproduced RT's own assertions of colossal audiences in the United States and globally (ODNI 2017, 9–10).

The view of RT as a cornerstone of Russian media influence is based on contradictory accounts portraying its audiences as either menacingly large or pathetically minute. The confusion reflects unresolved debates not only around the impact of attempts by

authoritarian states like Russia to undermine Western democracies but also around disinformation generally and its effects on political and social stability within Western societies. Disinformation does not only originate outside democracies. Numerous homegrown information manipulators can be found within democratic societies, as attested by recent examples in the United States and France (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Kirchgaessner et al. 2023). It is within the context of a phenomenon whose presence is pervasive and global, but which is frequently externalized and projected elsewhere, that we should assess the tendency of media and political commentators to make unevidenced claims about RT's audiences. Mickiewicz rightly critiqued this approach, pointing out that "one cannot argue from content alone back to the audience" (2017, 3; see also Szostek 2018b, 117). Yet, doing precisely that, the prominent British news commentator Ian Birrell (2018) assumed that RT's audiences shared RT's ideological worldview, and Matthew Turner (2016) asserted that RT has a "disillusioned Western audience," which he claimed to be "large."

It is indeed hard to verify RT audience data even from reputable sources, and much available data is produced by RT itself for public relations purposes. In the United Kingdom, however, reliable data are available from the period prior to the revocation of RT's broadcasting license and the access restrictions placed on its social media channels and apps. At this point, its UK viewing audiences were miniscule. In 2020 the British Audience Research Board (BARB) changed its methodology for recording television viewership to include figures from channels viewed on computers and tablets rather than only through television sets. Since then RT has failed to register in any of the weekly summaries because its viewing figures have been so low. The latest available BARB data were from the final week of December 2019 and showed that RT then had an average daily reach of 87,000 viewers and 0.02 percent of that week's audience share. To put these figures in perspective, that same week BBC1 was the most watched television channel, with a daily reach of 42,790,000 viewers and 22 percent of the audience share. The BBC News channel was the most-watched news channel, with over 3,000,000 daily viewers, and Sky News was the second most watched, with 1,918,000 viewers. Channels such as Cartoon Network had almost four times the amount of RT's daily viewers. The Horror Channel had eight times as many, and Comedy Central had over eleven times as many viewers (BARB 2019). In a similar vein, RT never accumulated sufficient viewers in the United States to register in national figures (Mickiewicz 2017). While some data (to which we had privileged access) suggested that RT's television audiences appeared to have been growing in the Middle East (Ipsos Connect 2018), there was no evidence that RT had a significant television audience anywhere in the Anglophone world.

In one of the earliest academic studies of RT, Yablokov 2015 noted that "it is virtually impossible to measure the channel's success and influence" because audience research is notoriously difficult (311). Since then, several academic studies have sought to assess the impact of RT. They avoid exaggerated claims about RT's audience size and impact. They too often make audience-related inferences based on RT's content, however. For example, Miazhevich (2018, 578) suggested that RT seemed "to appeal to audiences who have an anti-establishment, anti-corporation and anti-Western (particularly anti-American) predisposition," and further studies reaffirmed this view (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2018, 24; Elliot 2019; Newman et al. 2019; Audinet 2021). Others noted that RT's audience did not trust the mainstream media (MSM; Richter 2017b, 3) as they were attracted to conspiracy

theories, had niche interests, and were based on the fringes of the political spectrum. Most of these discussions of RT audiences tend to focus on users of RT's Anglophone output or those in a single country (Wagnsson 2022).

An exception is a systematic study by Orttung and Nelson (2019) of the strategies, as well as audiences, of RT's YouTube channels in several languages. The study utilized web traffic analysis tools to ascertain profiles of RT users and identified two trends that our research also confirmed. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, RT deployed a strategy of "primarily targeting an audience outside the West" (Orttung and Nelson 2019, 77). Orttung and Nelson also suggested that RT's audiences were skewed "toward highly educated males" (2019, 90). At the same time, our findings, based on an analysis of RT's Twitter users presented below, suggest the need to exercise caution in relation to Orttung and Nelson's (2019, 86–88) conclusion that RT managed to create "a niche audience of activists" who were busy spreading its messages. In view of the very high proportion of suspected fake social media accounts among RT's social media followers, the authenticity of these activist accounts is questionable.

It is difficult to ascertain modes of interaction between international audiences and media organizations. Although broadcasting data can reveal information about location, they cannot reveal viewer demographics or viewer interests or the extent of their shared political views. In studying RT's online audiences, researchers are confronted with the limitations that social media platforms place on data collection about their users. For example, YouTube, the platform on which RT appears to have had the greatest success prior to the war in Ukraine (Orttung and Nelson 2019), makes information about audiences (location, age, gender, other channels watched) available to channel owners but not to external researchers, who face similar constraints with researching Facebook and other social media channels. By using mixed methods and drawing upon multiple data sources, however, we can gain insights into certain segments of RT's audiences across different social media platforms. We begin by exploring RT's audiences on Twitter, using data accessed via Twitter's application programming interface (API) and analyzed using innovative computational science techniques, before turning to an analysis of data about RT's Facebook audiences collected through Facebook's social analytics platform, CrowdTangle.

RT's English-Language Twitter Followers

We first explored users of RT's main English-language Twitter account, @RT_Com, which at the time of our analysis in 2020 had 2.6 million followers. Following a Twitter account indicates that a user is interested in that account even if we do not know why. In the age of the attention economy, Twitter users' news feeds are algorithmically generated based on accounts followed. Thus, when users decide to follow RT, they are likely at least to be exposed to its content. This content may or may not resonate with their worldview, but followership does signal a political and/or social interest in the account being followed (Barberá 2015). By analyzing RT's main Twitter account, then, we can gain an insight into who has *chosen* to follow it.

We used Twitter's API to collect a list of the 2.6 million followers of @RT_COM, from

which we selected a random sample and collected information about other Twitter accounts followed by RT users (for a detailed discussion of our methodology, see Crilley, Gillespie, Vidgen, and Willis 2022, 225–29). Our sample consisted of 10,391 RT followers who formed part of a network of 6.48 million connections. The tweets sent by this sample generated a data set of 1.87 million tweets. To understand how RT's audience differs from other news audiences, we collected a control group of 1,000 Twitter users who had tweeted the word "News" but who did not follow RT.

We used social network analysis techniques in order to understand the general characteristics of RT's followers. First, we studied how our follower sample engaged with RT's tweets through retweets and mentions. Second, we analyzed demographic details to ascertain the gender and age of holders of accounts following RT and to determine if they were genuine or automated. Third, we examined shared interests and identities by grouping followers into audience segments based on other accounts they followed. We first looked for segments featuring more links within them than links to accounts outside them. By building on previous studies of how to characterize online communities using network science (Cha et al. 2010), we used a surfacing methodology to find the most characteristic accounts within each segment, defined as those accounts followed in the segment but not in other segments. This enabled us to find the accounts followed by an unexpectedly large number of users in each segment, giving us a sense of distinct RT Twitter audience categories.

Limited Engagement

Our sample of 10,391 followers generated 1.87 million tweets. Of these, only 0.15 percent (2,806 tweets in total) were related to RT content; 2,371 were retweets and 913 were replies/mentions. A very small number of followers in our sample engaged with RT content. Remarkably, just 1 user accounted for 10 percent of all engagements (284 tweets), and 10 users accounted for 40.4 percent. Only 325 followers—3.23 percent—responded to RT content at least once. Subsequently, it appeared that while people may have followed RT, they rarely commented on it or shared it across their own Twitter network. Thus, engagement with RT on its main Anglophone account was driven by a hyperactive minority, exactly as Orttung and Nelson (2019) found in relation to RT's YouTube channels. But are these hyperactive accounts genuine?

Aging Males and Bots

To understand the demographic characteristics of RT's Twitter audience, we used two inference tools. The first tool, the botometer, examines over one thousand features to help determine the probability that a Twitter account is an automated bot (Davis, Onur, Farrara, Flammini, and Menczek 2016). The second tool, the M3 inference tool, provides probabilistic demographic information about Twitter users (Wang et al. 2019). It estimates the age and gender of Twitter users as well as information about whether an account is an organization. Limitations and degrees of error affect automated computational tools, as their speed, scale, and accessibility are offset by their imperfect performance. They are

statistically reliable and have been shown to work well in order to assess the characteristics of social media users, however (see Crilley, Gillespie, Vidgen, and Willis 2022). Using these tools, we found that 39 percent of RT's followers were characterized as bots, which is far higher than the 1.5 percent of bots in our control group of other news followers. Other studies also provide data to suggest that RT has been bolstering its social media following through bots and fake accounts (Alexander 2015a, 2015b; Helmus et al. 2018, 24–25). This practice might explain the appearance of the hyperactive cluster in our data set, as well as in that of Orttung and Nelson (2019). It also reflects RT's needs as a state-funded organization. First, in order to ensure the steady flow of state funding it must convince its overseers in the presidential administration that it has significant global audiences. One member of RT's senior staff whom we interviewed suggested, to our initial surprise, that despite its meager Western following, the Kremlin nevertheless saw RT as successful in that region, owing to the high level of critical attention that, prior to 2022, it received from Western establishments and the MSM and that corroborated its anti-MSM narrative.[1] Revelations that RT boosts its audience figures through nefarious practices are thus treated by its management as yet more evidence of Russophobic MSM hysteria. This dynamic supports our overarching argument concerning the cocreation of RT's pariah status and its benefits to the broadcaster.

In demographic terms we found that RT followers were likely to be male (.75 probability compared to .62 in our control group) and to be older than other news followers (.2 compared to .15 probability of being 30–39 years of age and .27 compared to .22 of being over 40). These results support earlier research that RT largely attracts a male audience, and the skew toward older generations confirms a finding that RT's attempts to influence young audiences may often fall short of its aims (Saunders, Crilley, and Chatterje-Doody 2022). Comparative research from around the world demonstrates that older men tend to hold socially conservative views and are more likely to support, and vote for, populist parties and politicians than other demographics (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 462). By consistently deploying populist communication techniques, RT both shapes and reflects audience expectations.

Shared Interests

By next ascertaining who else the RT users in our sample followed on Twitter, we arrived at a sense of their shared interests. We thus provide evidence collected via network science across representative samples on an issue around which conclusions are generally drawn on the basis of anecdotal evidence or inferences from RT's strategy of prioritizing soft news in the content it disseminates. The top ten most followed accounts across our entire sample include two American presidents (Barack Obama and Donald Trump), six mainstream news sources (*New York Times*, BBC Breaking News, BBC World Service, CNN Breaking News, CNN, and Reuters), and two social media platforms—Twitter and YouTube. This suggests that RT's audience followed it as part of a varied media diet shared by Twitter users more broadly. The top ten most followed accounts, however, provide only a broad overview of RT's Twitter followership and their interests, so we then used computational analysis to organize our sample into segments based on other accounts they follow. By applying a Louvian algorithm (used to detect communities in larger networks), we

identified sixty-nine segments, of which the largest thirty-five accounted for 97.5 percent of RT followers in our sample. We then identified the top ten "most followed" and the ten "most characteristic" accounts in each segment, using a scaling factor to ascertain relative popularity. Some of these accounts may not be authentic, but it is difficult to prove their (in)authenticity because tools like the botometer are not 100 percent reliable, providing only an estimation of probability. Our analysis of RT Twitter user profiles thus comes with caveats.

Segmenting RT's English-Language Twitter Audiences

We manually coded the top ten most followed and top ten most characteristic accounts in each segment—those followed in these segments but not others. The most followed accounts proved similar across segments, so homing in on the top ten most characteristic accounts provided more detailed insights into the specific interests and identities of each segment. For example, in segment 6 the most followed accounts featured the left-wing former US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, and the most characteristic accounts were also all left-wing organizations from the United Kingdom and United States. This segment was therefore coded as "UK and US left-wing activists." The labels for each segment are presented in table 6.1.

One of the distinguishing features of every RT Twitter audience segment was that of geopolitical dispersion—how users constitute these segments based on different languages and/or nationalities despite @RT_Com being an English-language account. Some of the largest segments, even before the bans of 2022, featured African, Middle Eastern, South American, and Southeast Asian accounts. Notably, a significant number of segments followed celebrities and comic actors. RT's use of lighthearted entertainment and humor resonates with the tastes of such followers (Orttung and Nelson 2019; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021; Saunders et al. 2022).

Our study identified RT audiences other than those interested in entertainment and soft news. A significant number of segments formed around niche interests including travel news, pornography, cryptocurrency, blockchain technology, and computer games, suggesting that RT was effective at engaging those who sought information on topics that rarely feature in more mainstream news coverage. One example was news about emerging financial technologies, an issue extensively covered in RT UK's *The Keiser Report*, hosted by the US broadcaster Max Keiser.[2] This finding highlights RT's strategy of tapping into preexisting online communities by appealing to their unique interests and sense of group identity.

SEGMENT	% OF USERS
2	32.12 (Indian celebrities)
3	16.45 Japanese music
4	9.61 Latin pop/Hispanic celebrities
5	8.80 computer games/players
6	8.61 UK and US left-wing activists
7	8.56 Italian/European media and left-wing political actors
8	8.43 Spanish US left-wing activists/pro-Catalan politics
9	8.36 African/UK celebrities
10	8.26 Russian news/politics
11	8.05 right-wing/left-wing politics
12	7.98 right-wing/left-wing politicians and celebrities
13	7.82 Australian news/politics and left politics

[illegible]	[illegible] news
[illegible]	[illegible] actors and news
[illegible]	[illegible] and comic actors and news
[illegible]	[illegible] actors
[illegible]	[illegible] news
[illegible]	[illegible] news/Green politics
[illegible]	[illegible] and celebrity actors
96	Cryptocurrency and blockchain news/actors

TABLE 6.1. The main segments of RT's Twitter audience

While RT has a geopolitically heterogenous audience reflecting different interests and possessing different linguistic/national/cultural identities, it is important to note that our second-largest segment consisted of users who mainly followed mainstream Anglophone news sources. This implies that much of RT's audience followed it as part of a broader engagement with multiple sources. Indeed, rather than harboring niche antidemocratic sentiments as some commentators have implied, RT's Twitter audience is most likely to consume its content alongside that of other news providers. Indeed, even more specific segments focused on different national contexts tended to have news as their other defining feature (see, for example, the "Russian news," "Nigerian news," and "Indonesian news" segments listed in table 6.1).

Overall, we concluded that RT's *global* audiences are not drawn from the extremes of the political spectrum. Since RT's commentators and invited guests include far-right and far-left figures, it has been assumed that RT attracts followers from the political margins united in their mistrust of mainstream politics and inhabiting echo chambers for disseminating extreme views (Richter 2017a, 13, 35). Even a methodologically robust pre-2022 survey of RT/Sputnik audiences limited to Sweden only pointed to predominant support for nonparliamentary movements and right-wing parties (Wagnsson 2022). In contrast, our study indicates that across the wider world, RT followers have a more mainstream profile. One of our segments featured largely far-right and alt-right accounts, including those promoting QAnon and other conspiracy tweets, but it was very small. While others skewed leftward, there was little evidence of radical, antidemocratic positions in the tweets they generated. Mistakenly writing off RT's transnational audiences as disillusioned authoritarian sympathizers limits our understanding of how and why RT could, at times, attract ordinary media users from across different national and cultural contexts.

The above analysis contributes to current understandings of RT's influence on its global audience. It has limitations, however. Specifically, followership is a relatively weak indicator of audiences' ties to RT. Moreover, findings relating to Twitter are distinctive to that social media platform. Through its main Anglophone account, RT engaged some preexisting Twitter communities around shared interests. Facebook is generally considered a more effective community-building online space, however, because it does not restrict its posts to 240 characters and is structured around "Friendship" groups. RT well appreciates these affordances and has used this platform actively—for example, in fostering online communities around libertarian critiques of Western COVID-19–related restrictions (Hall 2020). Thus, we now turn to an RT Facebook data analysis situated in the context of other international broadcasters in order to identify RT's positioning relative to its competitors. By covering data across multiple languages, we shed further light on RT audiences' linguistic and cultural diversity—an underresearched issue (Nguyễn et al. 2022).

Mapping RT's Facebook Users across Languages and Regions

On Facebook—the largest global social media platform—RT has a variety of official pages that represent national, regional, and language-based channels (including RT Arabic, RT Spanish, and RT—its international English-language channel). There are also specific TV genre channels, such as RT Documentary, RT Sport, and RT 360—a page dedicated to virtual reality, immersive 360-degree videos. Some of these pages have amassed millions of followers. The three largest in April 2020 were RT Arabic (16.7 million followers), RT Spanish (16.4 million followers), and RT (6 million followers) (see figure 6.1). The least popular included RTDru (a Russian-language RT documentary page), with only 124,525 followers; RT 360, with 153,115 followers (it has not been updated since May 2019); and RT Sport, with 245,905 followers. This variety demonstrates that RT adopts multiple targeted strategies across linguacultural divides while accounting for diverse users' interests.

Several pages also indicate an attempt to build an audience through the use of innovative content designed specifically for social media. For example, RT Play consists of thirty-second videos designed for distributing across platforms dedicated to sharing short videos with users living busy lives—a principle echoed in RT Play's tagline "Waste no time, just PLAY." Similarly, RT Viral, a Spanish-language Facebook Page with the tagline "¡Comparte antes de que te lo compartan!" (Share before they share it with you!), features jokes, news items, pranks and "accidents," and other viral trends.

To better understand RT's Facebook audiences, we analyzed data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Meta. This generated data for each RT Facebook page pertaining to the number and contents of posts published, the total engagement with each post (emoji reactions such as Like, Love, Wow, Haha, Sad, Angry, as well as comments and shares), and the median engagement per post. In the following analysis, we use median engagement as a metric rather than mean engagement because a small number of posts have extremely high engagement, which skews the mean, so median engagement gives us a more accurate picture, particularly in a context where high engagement might reflect the use of bots and fake accounts.

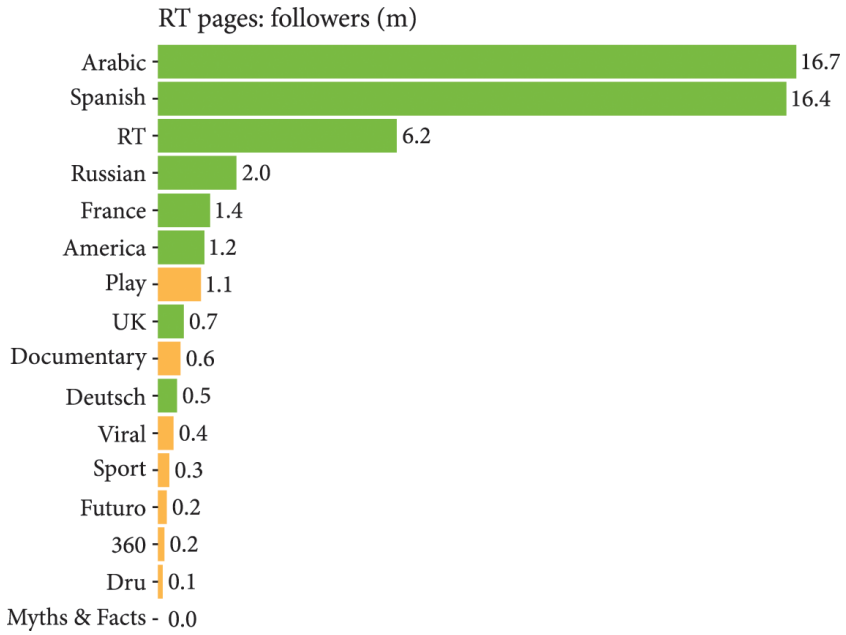

FIGURE 6.1. The number of followers for RT Facebook pages (millions)

When we focus on the eight most popular pages in different languages—RT, RT Arabic, RT Russian, RT Spanish, RT France, RT German, RT America, and RT UK—and explore how often each page posts, we find that RT Arabic is ranked highest. In the twelve-month period between May 2019 and April 2020, it published 79,000 posts—an average of 217 posts a day, or 1 post every seven minutes. RT Russian was not far behind, with about 68,000 over the twelve months, followed by RT Spanish with 46,000. The other pages, including the main English-language site, were some way behind in posting frequency. These variations suggest that RT's multiple language outlets have different social media resources and divergent audience engagement strategies. For example, the Russian state's political influence and strategic involvement in the Middle East—especially the Syrian war—significantly influenced how RT Arabic imagined its audiences. It sought to target and adapt its messaging accordingly (Dajani, Gillespie, and Crilley 2021).

RT Arabic also had the highest level of total engagement per post, ahead of RT Spanish and RT. It is unsurprising, however, that larger followings generate more engagement. It is therefore important to look at median engagement per million followers, and this metric shows that RT's most popular pages solicit low levels of median engagement: RT Arabic posts received a median of only 45 engagements per million followers, for example, with RT only slightly ahead with 77. In contrast, RT's least-followed pages performed relatively well in terms of the proportion of followers engaged by an average post. This underscores the fact that that numerical audience reach is a flawed metric that requires complementation by assessment of engagement. RT German had the third-smallest follower base, posting much less frequently than the other sites, but generated the highest

levels of median engagement on Facebook (555 per million followers). RT's UK page had the second-highest level of median engagement. RT Russian had a very low median level of engagement for its frequent posts (13 per million followers), indicating that it may not have been popular with Russian-speaking audiences. This finding differs from Orrtung and Nelson's (2019, 81, 86) analysis pointing to effective RT Russian social media engagement. Their research, however, focused on YouTube, one of the most popular platforms in Russia where Facebook, even prior to its ban in 2022, was outperformed by the local equivalent, VKontakte.

Prior to the start of the war in Ukraine, then, RT's Facebook presence was reasonably effective in gaining engagement across its language services. More popular pages, such as those of RT Arabic, RT Spanish, and RT, published extensively, enjoying high levels of engagement. Less popular pages with smaller overall audiences were capable, as in the case of RT German, of soliciting impressive levels of engagement per follower, perhaps suggesting that RT's German audience was more invested in its Facebook content. This point is corroborated by the type of engagement received; French and German audiences were most likely to comment on and share RT's content in comparison with other pages that gained predominantly emoji reactions (see figure 6.2).

In sum, the two most popular Facebook pages in terms of followers and overall engagement were those of RT Arabic and RT Spanish, followed by RT International's English-language page. Thanks to a combination of frequent posting and a high level of engagement per post, RT Arabic performed best against these metrics. The bulk of the activity consisted of emoji reactions, however—the weakest level of interaction. RT Spanish performed much better on shares, a more meaningful form of engagement pointing to content dissemination across the channel's own social networks. RT Russian had a high volume of posts—approaching that of RT Spanish—but the average level of engagement per post was low. Now that we have an understanding of the relative performance of RT's various Facebook pages, we next explore the type of content responsible for such outcomes.

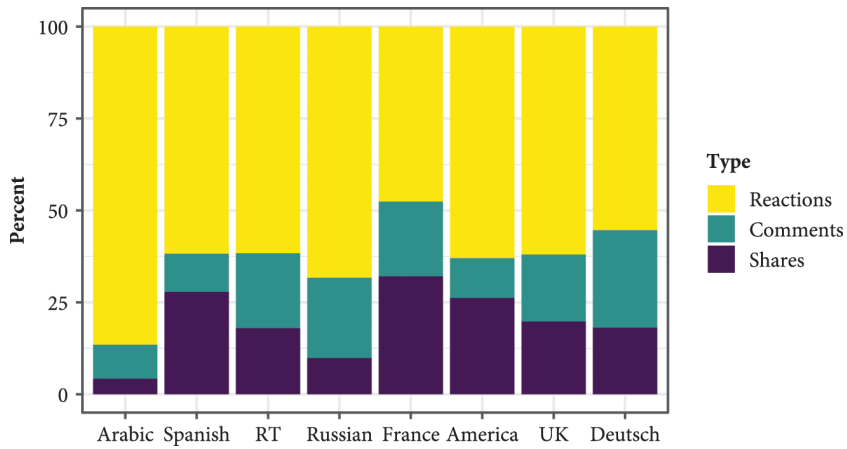

FIGURE 6.2. Type of engagement with RT Facebook pages

Popular Content and Interests among RT's Arabic-, Spanish-, and English-Language Facebook Followers

Across our data set, a small number of posts achieved extremely high levels of engagement. By examining the top posts for the three most popular RT pages on Facebook—Arabic, Spanish, and English (International)—we can determine what kind of content proves most appealing to RT followers in each of these languages. Given that these pages publish so much content, we analyzed the top ten most popular posts from when RT's individual language services joined Facebook until April 2020.

Middle East News and COVID-19 on RT Arabic

RT Arabic established a Facebook presence in January 2011, posting more frequently than any other RT Facebook page. For example, in April 2020 it published 8,075 posts. Its most popular post appeared on December 9, 2017. Beyond this, its ten most successful posts were all from March 2020, reflecting an upward trend for the growth of RT Arabic's Facebook audience during the studied period.

The content of RT Arabic's top ten most popular posts reflected a variety of topical news items from religious to pandemic stories (see table 6.2). Two of them referred to important Islamic holy sites, while all but one contained coronavirus news. Four of the coronavirus posts were related to news from China, covering recovery and infection rates, China-Saudi vaccine diplomacy, and virus treatments. Only one of these stories concerned Russia—a news report about Putin visiting a hospital with COVID-19 patients. The tenth most popular post was a report about Britain's COVID-19 vaccine. The popularity of these posts suggests that RT Arabic attracts Arabic-speaking audiences interested in a mix of international and regional news relating to events touching on their religious beliefs and orientations. The interest in news about China and Russia reflects the appeal of RT's coverage of non-Western developments. Interestingly, while RT Arabic's most popular Facebook post criticized the West in the context of Malaysian reactions to the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, none of the other top-ten posts targeted the West for criticism. Our research also indicates that while Russia did not significantly influence Western COVID-19 and vaccine discourse, RT's reporting on the pandemic was highly sought after by Arabic-speaking audiences during this period.

[illegible] (THOUSANDS)

[illegible]	Malaysian Prime Minister: Our army is ready to act for Jerusalem
[illegible]	95-year-old woman becomes Italy's oldest patient recovering from Corona
[illegible]	China announces the recovery of about 90% of people infected with the virus "Corona"
[illegible]	Russian ambassador to Saudi Arabia celebrates his country's promising vaccine against Corona
[illegible]	President Vladimir Putin today visited Hospital No. 40 in Komunarka, Moscow, to find out the course of treatment for people with Coronavirus
[illegible]	Official publication that the Corona epidemic is nearing its main focus
[illegible]	[illegible] today in a row … China reports only one local infection with Corona!
[illegible]	Deleted image of the circling plate in the Kaaba after stopping Umrah due to the Corona virus
[illegible]	[illegible] is a good drug for treating Corona
[illegible]	[illegible] announces a vaccine against COVID-19 and explains when its mass use may begin

TABLE 6.2. RT Arabic top-ten most engaged with posts, January 2011– April 2020

Soft News and Viral Videos on RT Spanish

RT's Spanish Facebook page also showed an upward trend in engagement since it began posting in January 2010. In April 2020 it published 4,427 posts: roughly half of RT Arabic's output. Two of its most popular posts were published in July 2019. Each reported the same viral news story. Whereas RT Arabic's top ten posts were mainly from March 2020, most of RT Spanish's dated to 2019. None, therefore, concerned COVID-19, and indeed only one of RT Spanish's most popular posts related to hard news. The top two reported the same viral video of a "Cuban music classic," while others covered social experiments, the "dwarf world cup," and other human-interest stories such as the tragic marriage of two lovers who knew that one of them was going to die. The only hard news was a story about Iran's response to the American assassination of General Qassem Soleimani in 2020. The prevalence of viral videos, soft news, and human interest stories seems to reflect a common engagement strategy across RT social media platforms. While such content drives engagement with RT Spanish, the prominence among its best-performing Facebook posts of one explicitly anti-American hard news story suggests that its political coverage cuts through the usual preference for entertainment and soft news content (table 6.3).

Promoting Macho Men on RT International

RT International's English-language Facebook page dates to March 2013. It was far less active than its Arabic and Spanish partners, publishing 1,687 posts on Facebook in April 2020. RT International's highest-performing stories appeared in July 2014 and March 2015 (see table 6.4). One of these—about a Shaolin monk's strength and abilities—was posted twice. It indicates how, as with RT Spanish, soft news dominated RT International's Facebook output. The most popular item was an account of a footballer's philanthropy, but there were also popular stories about natural disasters, celebrities, and sports. Significantly, however, they were often given a political edge related to Russia. For example, the fourth most popular story was about *The Fast and the Furious* actor Vin Diesel taking on the ice-bucket challenge and inviting Putin to follow his example. The sixth top story centered on the Ultimate Fighting Championship fighter Khabib Nurmagomedov beating his rival Connor McGregor. It was covered from the angle of Putin's comments about Nurmagomedov, with the headline "Putin Congratulates Khabib on His Win over McGregor," supplemented with the remark that "when someone provokes us from outside, there can be hell to pay." In conjunction with news reports about North Korean military parades and Syrian military operations against ISIS, such items highlight how RT International's most successful stories amounted to more than mere soft news and entertainment. Although they ranged over diverse topics, they were linked by their privileging of stereotypical masculinity. Stories about tough monks, sporting champions, military parades, and the association of Putin with macho figures suggested that RT International's audience was attracted to traditional notions of masculinity and representations of Putin (and Russia) that emphasize their male valor (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021). There is further evidence that visual content celebrating

masculinity holds global appeal. Wang (2023) finds that among RT videos disseminated by a major Chinese social media platform, those representing Putin as a macho figure and Russia as a global strongman generate the highest engagement levels.

[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
1,068,138	2019	of a Cuban music classic, performed by a Franco-Korean family, became a musical sensation on social media. Courtesy: Isaac et Nora.
1,055,223	2019	of a Cuban music classic, performed by a Franco-Korean family, became a musical sensation on social media. Courtesy: Isaac et Nora.
456,425	2019	not see it: How would you react to seeing an act of "bullying"? In this social experiment they harass a teenager and a Whopper Jr. to see how people behave in the face of an act of "bullying": the reactions are shocking.
365,129	2019	to start recycling.
268,961	2019	Cuban music classic, performed by a Franco-Korean family, became a musical sensation on social media. Courtesy: Isaac et Nora.
262,004	2018	Dwarf World Cup started in Buenos Aires, with nine international teams of small players competing against each other to become champions. Organized by the Argentine Civil Association Talla Baja, the tournament has the support of the Argentine Soccer Association and the National Sports Secretariat.
256,610	2019	organized their wedding and married even though both spouses knew that one of them would die soon.
250,000	2019	summer barely four years old went viral with this video in which, with a homemade drum kit improvised by his father, he accompanies a song sung by his mother.
246,474	2020	ani's murder: "We will take revenge." This was the reaction of the Iranians to the assassination of the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force. Iran's top religious leader, Ahmad Khatami, said on January 3 in Tehran that the United States "will no longer find peace" "as residents expressed outrage at US actions."
220,000	2019	23-year-old Parisian actor, stepped into the skin of a woman for a day to find out what it feels like: this was the social experiment #ANotrePlace (inourplace, in French) of the NiPutesNiSoumises (Ni putas) movement (neither whores nor submissive).

TABLE 6.3. RT Spanish top-ten most engaged with posts, January 2010– April 2020

[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
686,170	2014	all star Mesut Ozil has donated his World Cup prize money—totaling more than $400,000 for winning the tournament—to various charity projects in Brazil.
511,000	2015	steel spears and even an electric drill couldn't break through the skin of Zhao Rui, a 24-year-old Shaolin monk.
509,000	2015	steel spears and even an electric drill couldn't break through the skin of Zhao Rui, a 24-year-old Shaolin monk.
426,000	2019	Diesel challenges … Putin.
349,000	2019	politician: "Narrow escape of an aircraft which could have ended in a great disaster."
268,000	2018	Khabib on his win over McGregor, adding that "when someone provokes us from outside, there can be hell to pay."
210,000	2019	way through rubble and stone to rescue her puppies after house collapse.
196,000	2019	protest in Spain.
192,000	2017	marks 105th birth anniversary of its founding leader Kim Il-sung with military parade in Pyongyang (Streamed Live).
165,000	2016	to retake Mosul from ISIS.

TABLE 6.4. RT International top-ten most engaged with posts, March 2013–April 2020

Differences across the content of the most popular RT Facebook pages—Arabic, Spanish, and English (RT International)—further indicate that the channel's language services operate with localizing strategies calibrated for culturally distinctive media tastes. RT Arabic effectively engaged followers with stories about COVID-19, pointing to

successes in Russia's vaccine diplomacy in the Middle East, where social media users displayed remarkable suspicion of pandemic narratives promoted by Western organizations and figures (Alwaday 2022). RT Arabic's sensitivity to issues related to Islam might have also paid off. RT Spanish, in contrast, enjoyed the most success with its entertainment content, though nestled in its midst was content with an avowedly anti-American slant that the service expected to resonate with its main Latin American target audience. RT International's Facebook content achieved the most traction with stories about sports, celebrities, and war, the overwhelming majority of which celebrated traditional gender values. Now we must compare RT's Facebook performance with that of other international broadcasters.

RT in Comparative Context

If RT can count, albeit to different extents depending on language service, on the support of numerous Facebook followers, it must also compete with rivals for the attention of those followers. We now compare RT's International/English-language, Spanish, and Arabic Facebook pages with those of Al Jazeera (Qatar), BBC News (United Kingdom), CNN (United States), and CGTN (China) in Arabic, English, and Spanish, respectively. Using CrowdTangle, we analyzed posts published by each page during a twelve-month period from May 2019 to April 2020. For each language we compared followership and engagement across the five broadcasters, shedding further light on RT's global appeal.

English-Language International Broadcasters on Facebook

RT had the smallest total number of followers (6 million) when compared with the English-language Facebook pages of Al Jazeera (14 million), the BBC (53 million), CNN (19 million) and CGTN (106 million), which had the biggest audience, with 100 million more followers than RT. This could be explained by the large global Chinese diaspora, as well as by the possibility that China may also employ bots and fake accounts to bolster the international profiles of its state media (Xiao, Mozur, and Beltran 2021).

When engagement was weighted per million followers, however, Al Jazeera had the highest median engagement, with 92 engagements per million. The BBC (89 per million) and RT (77 per million) were in second and third positions, respectively. Thus, despite having the smallest following RT outperformed CNN and CGTN in audience engagement terms, with the usual caveat concerning the artificial inflation of numbers.

When engagement is analyzed by type, RT's English-language Facebook audience appeared to gain a higher proportion of comments and shares than its competitors (37 percent of total engagements). The significance of different types of interaction is often ambiguous. Reacting—clicking on one of the emoji buttons—is a comparatively weak interaction, and determining what a user means by it is therefore difficult. A Like may indicate pleasure at the news reported, approval of the person/outlet reporting it, or appreciation of the reporting style. Comments represent a stronger type of interaction since they require users to spend time on writing and replying to a page. The attitude they reflect

cannot be ascertained without scrutiny of their content, however. Sharing, too, is a relatively strong interaction because it extends the initial audience for the page across the sharer's social network. Sharer sentiment may be positive or negative, but sharing does indicate that a user finds a post attention worthy enough to disseminate it. As the only outlet for which comments outweighed shares, RT stood out among its competitors (though, once again, the caveat is the possible artificial inflation by paid trolls, bots, or fake accounts).

Of the most popular fifty posts published by each page during our period of analysis, only two achieved engagement of over five hundred thousand (shares, comments, reactions): a CNN feel-good story from November 2019 about an Australian woman rescuing a koala bear and an amusing BBC post about two children interrupting a live Zoom interview with a man at home. Ten of the top twenty posts overall were from CGTN; they were a mixture of science and human-interest stories. Despite its clear attempts to create viral content, RT International's page rarely, if ever, matched its competitors' abilities to go viral.

Arabic-Language International Broadcasters

When compared with the Arabic-language pages of Al Jazeera (twenty-four million followers), the BBC (twelve million), CNN (three million), and CGTN (fifteen million), RT Arabic had the second-largest Facebook following (seventeen million). On the metric of median engagement per million followers, however, Al Jazeera had the highest (eighty-two engagements per million followers) and therefore the most engaged audience, with CNN (forty-eight per million) in second and RT (forty-five per million) in third place.

Furthermore, despite having the highest level of total engagement, RT Arabic had the smallest proportion of comments and shares, indicating a weaker level of engagement than that of its Arabic-language competitors. Low engagement levels with online Arabic-language content are not specific to RT, however. The four other Arabic-language Facebook pages also received fewer comments and shares than their English-language counterparts. Moreover, RT and Al Jazeera were the only Arabic-language pages featuring a significant number of stories with engagement above one hundred thousand (shares, comments, reactions). In March 2020, RT Arabic posted several stories with high engagement—almost all about COVID-19. Al Jazeera's top-performing stories were also largely COVID related, but with some exceptions. Otherwise, only three posts (two from CGTN and one from the BBC) achieved engagement of over one hundred thousand. One of these (a CGTN post) was pandemic related, and the other two were human-interest stories. Overall, then, RT Arabic was comparatively effective at producing content capable of outperforming its Arabic-language competitors.

Spanish-Language International Broadcasters

CGTN had the most Spanish-speaking Facebook followers (seventeen million), with RT a close second (sixteen million), followed by CNN (thirteen million), the BBC (five million), and then Al Jazeera (four million). Against the metric of median engagement (i.e., per

million followers), however, Al Jazeera (AJ+) Spanish significantly outperformed all of its rivals (539 engagements per million followers). It also scored highest in terms of engagement type, with over half of the Facebook interactions with AJ+ Spanish coming in the form of shares or comments. BBC Spanish ranked second for both median engagement and meaningful engagement type (more comments and shares), with RT in third place for both.

Four posts in our twelve-month study period garnered over five hundred thousand interactions. The top two—by RT Spanish—covered the same topic: the above-mentioned video of a Franco-Korean family performing a classic Cuban song. The other two were AJ+ Spanish human-interest stories. RT's best-performing posts were a mixture of human interest/entertainment stories and hard news, including a report on Iran's reaction to the murder of Qassem Soleimani. Despite lagging behind the other two broadcasters in median engagement and engagement quality criteria, RT's Spanish Facebook pages outperformed those of its other language services.

A New Dynamic during Russia's War on Ukraine

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, RT's right to broadcast was rescinded across North America, Australia, the European Union, and the United Kingdom.[3] On social media, European followers were no longer able to access RT's Twitter or Facebook accounts without VPNs. YouTube banned access to RT's channels globally, forcing its video channels to move to alternative streaming platforms, including Rumble and BitChute, known for hosting far-right output (Sweney 2022). In contrast, people from other parts of the world continued to freely access RT's online content, accounting for the relative stability of its follower and engagement figures. This was especially true of its Arabic and Spanish services, surprising an analyst who investigated the war's impact on RT audiences in April 2022 (see Boborykin 2022).

The development looks less surprising, if one recognizes that RT's global audience is not concentrated in Europe or North America. Its Twitter following is particularly heterogenous, with large numbers located in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. On Facebook, RT appears to have established language-specific audiences around its Arabic and Spanish pages well before the war. These pages compare well with those of other international broadcasters. Their relative popularity is probably attributable to the fact that they are intended for audiences based in countries across South America and the Middle East that take critical views of the United States and are open to RT's framing of current affairs. When on October 22, 2022, we accessed RT's main Anglophone Twitter account @RT_Com via VPN, it had four hundred thousand more registered followers than during our earlier study (3 million as opposed to 2.6 million). The extent to which this number might have been artificially boosted by bots or fake accounts is hard to determine. There is no doubting RT's postinvasion reorientation toward, and investment of resources in, courting new non-Western followers, however.

To understand how the postinvasion environment affected RT's social media performance, we used CrowdTangle in October 2022 to examine figures for followership and content traction. We found that since February 2022, several RT Facebook pages have

lost followers, while others have more. Despite Western bans, the French and International services have grown by 2.89 percent and 2.45 percent, respectively, attracting tens of thousands more Facebook followers at a time when RT's newly founded Africa offices suggest that it is targeting Francophone Africa. George Galloway's Sputnik on the RT page has increased its Facebook audience the most, by 18 percent, but given its modest initial size, this amounts to a mere 1,020 extra followers. RT Spanish no longer appears in CrowdTangle data because access to it has been geographically limited due to its Russian state sponsorship and registration in Russia, whereas other RT pages are registered elsewhere. CrowdTangle therefore no longer supports access to information about RT Spanish reach and engagement. Our check from February 2022 suggested that at the time of the invasion, RT Spanish had 18 million Facebook followers. In October the figure had barely changed, standing at 17.9 million. Even allowing for bot activity, RT's ability to maintain or even increase several of its Twitter and Facebook audiences indicates that access restrictions are having a limited effect globally.

RT has, nonetheless, lost some of its Facebook following. Its German Facebook presence shed 1 percent of its small total, as did its Arabic service, which meant a drop of a quarter of a million followers, the majority of whom abandoned RT on a single day, coinciding with Meta's announcement in September 2022 that it had disrupted "the largest and most complex Russian-origin operation [on Facebook] since the beginning of the war in Ukraine" (ABC News 2022). This development further points to inauthenticity within RT's following.

Beyond followership figures, RT Arabic and RT International suffered losses of approximately three-quarters and two-thirds of their respective audience engagement. Despite shedding 250,000 followers, RT Arabic received the most interactions of all RT pages in the eight months from Russia's invasion up to October 2022—a total of 16.8 million, of which 14.4 million were likes, 1 million were comments, and 229,000 were shares. RT International garnered 7.4 million total interactions, of which 4.4 million were likes, 1.1 million were comments, and 561,331 were shares. Nonetheless, these 2022 figures were far lower than those measured in our earlier analysis. Ultimately, while non-Western social media users can still access RT, engagement with its major social media accounts has appeared to decline steeply over the course of the war. Critical views of Russia's actions are only a partial factor here since RT's following is largest in regions where reactions to the invasion were not overwhelmingly negative but rather neutral or even supportive of Russia (Blankenship and Ordu 2022; Foa et al. 2022).

The top ten RT Arabic posts with the most interaction since the invasion concerned the war. Of RT International's top ten most popular posts during this period, all but two were war related, covering Russian military advances in Ukraine and Russian limitations on gas supplies to Europe. Even the two posts not directly addressing the war nonetheless referenced it obliquely; one discussed a military parade in Moscow, and the other reported Russia's discovery of a large Arctic oil field. The traction gained by these RT International posts indicated a shift in preferred audience content in the first months of the war—away from soft news and entertainment and toward narratives of Russian military and economic power. The fact that the same trend affected RT Arabic reflects both the war's global importance and its salience in RT's own coverage since February 2022.

Our analysis of RT Twitter and Facebook audiences offers a range of new insights enabled by an innovative methodological approach that analyzes RT's audience across two

major social media platforms and places these in the context of other international broadcasters on Facebook in three different languages. It corroborates the findings of other research but goes several steps further. In particular, our study provides a detailed audience profile for RT's main international English-language Twitter account, identifying shared follower interests. Like other researchers, we found that RT is often able to reach and engage users through entertainment and human-interest stories. In addition, we showed that RT has built its audiences by tapping into a wide range of preexisting online communities whose niche interests are distinctive (e.g., digital currencies and new financial technologies).

Our follower sample included a high percentage of suspected bots, indicating that we should treat with caution the results of RT audience research reliant on computational tools alone, including our own and Orttung and Nelson's (2019) shared finding that online audience engagement with RT is driven by a small hyperactive minority. The fact that RT Arabic's Facebook page lost 250,000 followers, including especially active ones, during the September 2022 Meta campaign to disrupt Russia-sponsored influence operations seems to indicate that at least some hyperactive accounts among RT social media followers are suspect. Overall, actual Twitter interactions with RT were low. Only 3.23 percent of followers engaged at least once between 2018 and 2020. This is likely to reflect the genuine extent of Anglophone engagement with RT. We have argued that the relative ease with which user numbers can be artificially inflated creates a win-win situation for RT. Already disdained as a shameless outcast by Western societies, by adopting a practice associated with this status RT can deceptively reassure its own Russian funders of its impact. If the practice additionally generates Western outraged accusations of disinformation, these can be further twisted to RT's advantage via the antiestablishment populist pariah pitch it makes to its international audiences.

At the same time, artificially inflating client/supporter numbers is common practice across international commerce and now politics. Jacob Dailey, research manager at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), commented in relation to an ISD report on bot use during Brexit that "the sort of dirty tricks which we saw being tried out by Russia during the US elections are now being adopted across the board" (quoted in Smith and Boyd 2019).

Our analysis of RT Facebook audience reach and engagement patterns similarly advances our understanding of RT's users and develops the discussion started in chapter 4 of the outlet's localizing strategies, designed to exploit varying ethnocultural sensibilities and interests. For example, while RT Spanish's Facebook followers reacted enthusiastically to human-interest stories—a trend identified for RT's YouTube channels—the most popular RT Arabic stories dealt with current events, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, and critiques of US Middle Eastern policy. RT Arabic Facebook posts exhibited particular sensitivity to Islam-related issues, while RT International's most successful posts covered soft news items (e.g., sports related) that favorably represented Putin and Russia. Our findings thus highlight the Western-centric bias of the information war paradigm, which tends to reduce Russia's political communication strategy to fighting informational battles with Western societies. In fact, from well before 2022 Russia's political communication efforts appeared to target non-Western societies, which, as the Kremlin consistently maintains, constitute the majority of the world's population. Ironically, RT likewise seeks as much to "provincialize Europe" as to undermine Western democracies.[4]

Any international media outlet's success or failure in capturing and maintaining audiences is always relative to that of its rivals. We have in this context argued that, overall, RT follower and engagement figures tell only part of the story. Engagement type (from weaker emoji reactions to stronger and more meaningful comments and shares) is also important. Despite having the second-largest Facebook following after Al Jazeera, RT Arabic dropped to third place after both Al Jazeera and CNN on the median engagement per million criterion, performing worst of all the broadcasters on comments and shares. In contrast, RT International, which had the lowest overall following, enjoyed more deeply engaged audiences, gaining more comments and shares than the four other broadcasters. RT Spanish outperformed other RT language services, having the second-highest Facebook following after CGTN, the highest total engagement of all the compared broadcasters and occupying third place after Al Jazeera and BBC for engagement quality. It proved capable of generating posts with the highest total engagement across all five broadcasters.

By 2022 RT had amassed significant non-Western followings beyond the Anglophone mediasphere. Its Arabic and Spanish Facebook pages were on a noticeably sharp upward trajectory during the decade up to 2020. Moreover, following the various access restrictions imposed on it after Russia's full invasion of Ukraine, RT appeared to retain, and in some cases even increase, its social media following. Its main Anglophone Twitter account, as well as the Facebook pages of RT International and RT France, fell into this category. In contrast, RT German and RT Arabic lost some of their following, partly due to Meta's closure of several bogus accounts. All RT Facebook engagement types fell into steep decline in the first eight months of the war, however. At the same time, the war-related posts of RT Arabic and RT International secured significant interaction, indicating that Russia was succeeding in projecting its war narratives among non-Western audiences. The interaction with these posts, alongside the aforementioned increase in followership, indicates the potential of RT Arabic and RT International to speak to new audiences interested in RT's perspective on Russia's war on Ukraine.

In general, RT's global audiences, most of whom are in the Global South, appeared neither politically extreme nor antidemocratic. Instead, most followed RT as a comparative media reference point. Tweets within left-leaning segments did not express radical populist positions, and the single audience segment focused on far- and alt-right accounts was small. We must, however, avoid overgeneralizing RT's linguistically and culturally diverse audiences, the issue we address in chapter 7.

7

TALKING TO RT AUDIENCES

Notions of what RT "is" include common perceptions of its audiences. As our data-driven research shows, such perceptions may diverge substantially from reality. Far from residing at the margins of the Western liberal order, the typical follower of RT's Twitter or Facebook pages is more likely to live in an Arabic- or Spanish-speaking region where anti-Western and anti-imperialist sentiments are more mainstream than in the Western Anglophone media. For this reason, Nick Cohen's (2022) assertion that "the RT story seems over" following the expulsion of Russian outlets from Western media space appears premature. Rather, the aftermath of the invasion makes the need to understand Russian state propaganda and disinformation, and the particular role played by RT in its international communications infrastructure, ever more urgent.

RT is not a singular entity. Nor has it fabricated an identity of its own volition and on its own terms. This identity instead emerged in conjunction with competing political and media forces. Its overriding image in the West as the Kremlin's primary tool of disinformation was propagated unwittingly by its journalistic adversaries, who consolidated its pariah status within the populist media landscape, as well as by academics. The perceived, if limited, sustenance it gained from consumers seemingly willing to accept its deceptions contributed to the emergence of this status. To appreciate these processes, we must go beyond a quantitative data analysis that treats users as data points to delve into why and how actual audiences engage with it. In other words, while we captured a bird's-eye view of RT's online audiences in chapter 6, this does not provide the rich insights that talking to RT's audiences can achieve. Despite tendencies to sideline qualitative audience research in an age of datafication, talking to actually existing audiences continues to

provide the clearest insights into their motivations and perceptions (Livingstone 2019).

Why Talking to RT Audiences Is Important

This chapter presents an analysis of qualitative data gathered through talking to RT's audiences in interviews, focus groups, and long, ethnographic-style conversations between 2018 and 2022. We focus on RT's UK audiences. From the outset, therefore, it is important to differentiate the worldwide RT online audiences analyzed in chapter 6 from the UK subsection of that constituency analyzed in this chapter, as well as how different methods yield different kinds of insights. A willingness to subject our own findings to constant refinement and self-scrutiny in the light of new evidence is, as we recall, one of our book's guiding principles. Adherence to it is key to the argument we develop throughout regarding how we should understand not just what RT is but what state propaganda and disinformation are and the nature of RT's relationship with both phenomena.

Our qualitative interviews with 109 individuals enabled us to make sense of RT's elusive audience (they are not a group readily available and accessible for researchers) to discover why they choose to consume RT's content and how they engage with it—despite or even because of the disdain it attracts. No unified, homogenous image of RT's audiences emerges from our research. What we capture in this chapter is the clear patterning of responses and reasonings and the themes and tropes that emerged through talking to audiences. We explore their relationship with RT as an organization and as a producer of media content. This multimethod approach offers a more rounded understanding of not just what RT is and what it means to audiences, but also the degree and nature of the deception in which, according to many Western commentators, it deals.

Between Brand Image and Audience Perceptions

Those who, like Cohen (2014), characterize RT's audience as antidemocratic fanatics do so based on assumptions. Usually, they fail to investigate audiences themselves or why they consume RT. Even those academics who have researched RT's role in the US elections and Brexit have not actually researched audiences who engaged with the outlet, so its putative influence and effects are merely presumed rather than studied (Flaherty and Roselle 2018; Jamieson 2018). This chapter helps to plug that gap. Our qualitative research identifies diverse audience segments (or groupings) that embrace a wide spectrum of ideological positionings from extreme right to extreme left. Yet what most RT audiences share is a deep mistrust of the Western mainstream media (MSM) at the same time as an acute suspicion of Russian media manipulation. These findings inform our understanding of the appeal of populist media rhetoric, of the profiles of those who consume a news diet of what we habitually deem "Russian state propaganda and disinformation," and of the interstate dynamic driving the meaning of these terms. For conspiracists suspicious of mainstream discourses, the labeling of RT as a scandalous tool of malign influence may indicate deceptive intent on the part of *both* the Kremlin *and* its detractors. Such complex

attitudinal stances transcend specific events, even those as momentous as Russia's war on Ukraine. We have explored the extent to which they were challenged or, conversely, reinforced by the war via a follow-up survey.

British RT audiences, though very small, were important to RT from its inception. The channel's original purpose was, in Putin's words, "to break the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon mass media in the global flow of information" (cited in Audinet 2017). RT originally launched in 2005 with English-language TV broadcasts on RT International, and its offices were partly based in London. Between 2014 and February 2022, RT broadcast a dedicated RT UK channel for British audiences on free-to-view television, making it more accessible than in other domains. Understanding the appeal of RT's content among British audiences can help make sense of RT's appeal to Anglophone news media consumers globally, even when content is also partially tailored to local and regional interests.

Where audiences beyond the domain of the liberal order had many and varied reasons for engaging with RT, the same is true of the segmented audiences within that order in the preinvasion period. In providing an alternative version of global events, RT could appeal to the international news "omnivores" who saw it as one among many sources; its innovative soft power projects (around the Russian Revolutions' centenary and the FIFA 2018 World Cup) piqued the interests of an entirely different audience segment (Massanari and Howard 2011). A further pattern included a small segment aligned with alt-right networks. Thus, RT's hydra-headed appeal enabled heterogenous sociopolitical and interest groups to find content that resonated with them.

In February 2022, what remained in the West of RT's already compromised functions as (1) a tool of benign soft power and (2) a standard international news broadcaster was torn asunder by Russia's war on Ukraine, though the alt-media disruptor function (3) acquired limited new momentum as a consequence of the war. There were tensions across the three functions, but prior to 2022 they had assisted RT in diversifying its appeal with audiences. RT's agility in commuting across its tripartite identity had also enabled it to defy easy definition, subvert expectations, and confound audiences, researchers, and media pundits alike.

Methodological Framework

We conducted 109 interviews with RT's UK audiences between January 2018 and May 2021, with a follow-up online questionnaire given after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in November 2022. Two major RT soft power initiatives—the centenary of the Russian Revolution and the 2018 FIFA World Cup—structured our focus group interviews (each with up to eight people), while individual and small-group interviews invited audiences to talk about their engagement with RT's full range of news coverage. Some conversations took place individually and over several months, allowing us to produce in-depth pen portraits of regular followers. Some were face-to-face, conducted across the United Kingdom (London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Swansea). Others were online video calls, landline phone calls, or conversations through text messaging, WhatsApp, or email. We asked a range of general questions covering participants' engagements with, and perceptions of, RT. We then asked more focused questions concerning the media coverage

that they had followed around key media events—including a subset interrogating the coverage provided by RT. More detailed explanations of the methods used for particular case studies can be found in the articles on which this chapter builds (see Crilley, Gillespie, and Willis 2020; Crilley, Gillespie, Vidgen, and Willis 2022; Hall 2022a, 2022b).

There is no simple or quick way to locate RT audiences. We invited potential research participants in a variety of ways. We sent out invitations via online forums, emails, and direct messages to RT social media followers, as well as used snowballing techniques. We also used computational methods to identify Twitter users who had engaged with RT (through retweets and replies) and invited them to speak to us. Alongside this, we used our own personal networks and those among our colleagues and friends to identify people who consumed RT. Our sample is not representative of RT's UK audiences in general, let alone of the UK population, but it nevertheless yields important insights and patterns.

We sought to interview a diverse set of audiences and users in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, and political viewpoints. Our sample is nonetheless skewed toward males with higher education, aged eighteen to forty years. The gender imbalance (20 percent were women) reflects chapter 6's findings that RT attracts predominantly male audiences (see also Orttung and Nelson 2019). Of those willing to provide their age, our youngest participant was eighteen years of age and our oldest was seventy-five. In total, 6 percent of those we spoke to were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, 44 percent were twenty-five to thirty-five, 34 percent were thirty-five to fifty-four, and 16 percent were fifty-five and above. General Data Protection Regulation legislation ruled out requesting details of ethnicity and race. In November 2022, nine months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we recontacted thirty participants requesting written responses to a questionnaire that sought updated information about engagement with RT and other outlets and about shifts in opinion. We received thirteen returns, but the responses were remarkably consistent, broadly corroborating findings from another postinvasion survey of RT followers (Wagnsson, Blad, and Hoyle 2023).

We situate our research in the context of the limited number of RT audience studies to date. Unlike our study, however, most of this previous work operates within a "media effects" paradigm. This approach assumes a direct cause-and-effect influence of media on behaviors and attitudes. It tends to rely on quantitative survey methods or laboratory experiments that expose people who do not actually follow RT for its content and then elicit their views (Fisher 2020; Carter and Carter 2021). One survey experiment found that exposure to RT "can decrease favorable attitudes toward Russia's rivals," although "it does not seem to improve views of Russia itself" (Fisher 2020, 288). Another found that when American citizens read RT articles, they were "15 percentage points less likely to support an active US foreign policy, 20 percentage points more likely to believe the United States is doing too much to solve world problems, and 10 percentage points more likely to value national interests over those of allies" (Carter and Carter 2021, 76). They found "no evidence that RT shapes Americans' views on domestic policy or undermines trust in democratic institutions" (Carter and Carter 2021, 76). Such methods, however, depending on how they are administered, lack the depth of human insight that qualitative studies can deliver, and recognizing that "Americans do not consume RT in a lab" (Carter and Carter 2021, 77), the authors acknowledge the limitations of experiment-based research even while demonstrating its strength.

Wagnsson (2022) goes beyond this paradigm in her preinvasion survey of 3,033 Swedish

consumers of RT and Sputnik, finding that the "identity grievance" and "antiestablishment" narratives favored by them resonate with the Swedish public. Her quantitative methods rule out in-depth engagement with individuals, however. Alongside our previously published studies (Crilley et al. 2020; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020), more recent work has begun to use in-depth qualitative methods such as interviews to research RT's audiences in the United Kingdom and in Sweden (Hall 2022a, 2022b; Wagnsson et al. 2023). Natalie-Anne Hall (2022a, 16) finds that RT had appeal with British audiences because of its "outsider status" in a political environment where people mistrusted the MSM and were discontent with government decisions after Brexit. Similarly, British RT audiences were drawn to RT because they felt they could not trust British media to report impartially on contemporary wars and conflicts due to the legacy of the Iraq War (Hall 2022b, 74). Another Swedish project conducted a month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine focused on interviews with forty-three self-declared RT and Sputnik followers and found that not all followers of RT have beliefs that align with its output (Wagnsson et al. 2023). This study generated a follower typology consistent with our findings but, unlike our research, did not engage with participants over a sustained period.

Our qualitative study allowed us to make sense of the complex modes in which RT's consumers engage with what its many detractors view as an instrument of state deception; among the consequences of the events of 2022 was Western politicians' and journalists' conclusive assignation of RT to the category of disinformation purveyor.[1] The European Union (EU) and UK Parliament rationales for banning RT across their jurisdictions (but not that of the UK media regulator) overtly reference "disinformation" despite having previously used the lexicon of "bias," "state propaganda," and "non-conformity with impartiality standards" (see Council of the EU 2022; Muvija and James 2022). In common with much postinvasion discourse about Russia, this designation was sometimes applied retrospectively to pre-2022 RT output. By contrast, the US Department of State Global Engagement Center (2020, 2022a, 2022b) had, by January 2022, produced two reports detailing RT's contribution to Russia's "disinformation ecosystem," legitimating its more direct condemnation six months into the war of the "lifetime of lies" lived by RT's editor in chief. The European approach might indicate a hasty expansion of the scope of disinformation to embrace activities hitherto viewed as adjacent to it or instead signal a belated alignment with the US position that RT was solely disinforming all along. An ability to sample the mindsets of RT consumers would shed valuable light on this issue.

Digitally Savvy Skeptics

We began by asking our participants how they accessed news media and how often. These questions prompted two key, if unsurprising, insights that confirm chapter 6's findings: first, that RT is seen as one among several other international news sources (a tendency that did not dissipate in 2022) and, second, that social media shapes how news is consumed (Chadwick 2013). One typical comment came from an interviewee who stated, "I tend to hear about general current affairs and events first from social media, usually through Twitter.… I follow RT … the BBC … the *Independent*." Such comments point to the efficacy of RT's efforts to harness social media affordances to build audiences (efforts curtailed by

postinvasion bans in Western domains but not beyond them).

Each individual across our conversations offered multiple, sometimes competing, reasons for following RT. Several overarching themes emerged. The first was the twin effect of a lack of trust in the MSM and in political elites that provided a motivation for including RT among other sources accessed. Second, our participants largely embraced the view that there are multiple perspectives on world events and that all state-funded news channels, especially international broadcasters, report events from a national perspective. Third, they saw RT as one answer to their concerns about the importance of media and political objectivity. Typically, however, they claimed that their media savviness enabled them to formulate their own assessments about the underlying realities of world events from diverse sources and to decode the ideological perspectives of key actors. There is indeed a logic in applying impartiality principles requiring the consideration of multiple perspectives to transstate as well as substate contexts. For if, in pursuing truth domestically, the British BBC gives voice to politicians of right, left, and center, then why, in the pursuit of truth about international events, should its audiences not also use their ease in navigating a complex digital world to consult national broadcasters other than the BBC? One can question this stance, but the finding contradicts portrayals of RT's audiences as passive dupes who merely regurgitate the broadcaster's own populist propaganda. Moreover, if, for many, the opinions of RT audiences border on nihilistic relativism, such attitudes form only one aspect of a much broader crisis of journalistic values involving "a reckoning over 'objectivity' and internal struggle sessions to replace it" (Cohen 2022). The growing tendency in unruly social media discussions of news events to prioritize sentiment (what feels right) over evidence (the objective facts) is a populist trend that RT has ably grasped, adding another dimension to the crisis. Let us now examine each theme in turn.

Distrust of Mainstream Media

One of RT's favored news frames—the core of its counterhegemonic, populist brand—is its antagonism toward the MSM—and Western democratic establishments. Wagnsson (2022) identifies among her generally right-leaning Swedish respondents a corresponding rejection of MSM biases, indicating the resonance of the theme among several RT target audiences. Similar views were expressed by the largely, though not exclusively, progressive-left participants in our qualitative research. These views can be reconciled with conclusions drawn from our own quantitative data that revealed RT followers to be far more mainstream in their news consumption habits than conventional wisdom indicated. As mentioned earlier, it is important to differentiate the worldwide RT audiences studied in chapter 6 from the UK subsection of that constituency analyzed here. In the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and Latin America, suspicion of Western media is not a marginal position. It can coexist comfortably with belief in electoral pluralism, commitment to market economics, and moderate views on identity issues. Even in Western contexts, distrust of the MSM does not require a rejection of democracy; mainstream UK journalists of left (the *Guardian*) and right (the *Daily Mail*) have railed against MSM prejudices in relation to, inter alia, the underreporting of racism and the detrimental effects of COVID-19 lockdowns (Malik 2022; Koenig et al. 2022). The critique of the MSM has

entered the everyday lexicon of political debate in democratic societies. Nonetheless, our participants regularly associated broadcasters like the BBC and CNN with Western political elites. One referred to the BBC as "the British Ministry of Truth." Another claimed that "the BBC tends to give a very pro-NATO, pro-Western position on things … because the BBC is so pro-Establishment." Mainstream journalists were thought to parrot elite views rather than those of the "people":

> A: The British media is full of these columnists who create their own kind of artificial scandals … like "is Jeremy Corbyn a Nazi sympathizer?" … but you try and get … people … involved with Momentum or … the [Scottish] Independence movement to come on the media and it's only the press outlets of the enemies of the British state [like RT] that will do that.
> B: I think what you were saying … about people who run the BBC, the political editors, … they all come from the same community … the same class.

For similar reasons, mainstream condemnations of RT propaganda were interpreted as distractions from the truth delivered by "little, pathetic, rich boys who used to have the whole control of the media" and who are now "lashing out at [RT] for daring to question the bumph that they've been trying to get us to … swallow for decades." But this apparent internalization of RT's "Question More" mantra did not indicate the wholesale endorsement of RT's agendas, let alone its pro-Russian stances.

Our postinvasion questionnaire revealed strong (but not universal) cynicism about, and in some cases hostility to, Russia's actions. Only one person wholly resiled from their former sympathetic attitude to RT and Russia, however, declaring "I take everything back I said a couple of years ago about Putin. The man's … psychopathic, inadequate." Another pointed to a much subtler shift: "My opinion of Russia remains basically unchanged. However, I do question their motives more now." Those who had previously watched RT critically found themselves "strengthened" in the view that "RT and television more generally is an important propaganda tool for the Russian government. Russia has become an autocratic dictatorship where alternative views are no longer tolerated." Yet the thirst for nonmainstream news sources lingered; in many cases so, too, did the desire to "hear the Russian point of view' " on a war perceived as serving interests not reflected in "one-sided" MSM narratives, as the following four comments indicate:

> Mainstream Media … all have their own agenda and with regard to the war in Ukraine, it's all us vs them, innit?;
> I have no doubt that RT would be pushing the narrative of the Russian government, but at the same time would give a history behind the reason for the incursion into what is now part of the Russian Federation;
> I don't agree with Putin's government, but I … find it ironic the way the … BBC and CNN will focus on the war in Ukraine yet what's going on in Palestine and Yemen will hardly get a mention;
> I cannot watch BBC as it is pure propaganda and vile. They interview people from Donbas and say they are bombed by Russia when in fact it is Ukraine. BBC supports Nazis.

Others went further and saw in the Ukraine war vindication of their mistrust of "Western imperialists" and in the banning of RT corroboration of that mistrust: "I am

impressed by the Kremlin's determination to defend Russia's independence from Washington's globalist empire.… They are standing up for fundamental and inalienable rights of all nations.… I consider the restrictions an insult to my intelligence and I would like to think other analysts feel the same."

As other RT audience researchers have argued regarding postinvasion European restrictions on RT (Wagnsson et al. 2023), "a deeper understanding of who engages with these outlets, and their motivations … can … inform the debate around the appropriateness of the EU's response." In addition, however, unlike the results of Wagnsson (2022), which underscored the predominantly right-wing sympathies of Swedish RT followers, our UK participants' hostility to establishment actors carried both right-wing and left-wing inflections. Subsequently, differences between our findings and those of the Swedish research reaffirm the importance of local contexts, the peculiarities of which make generalizing about an RT audience problematic. Nonetheless, we have already broached issues affecting comparisons with world contexts in which antipathy to perceived Western hubris is mainstream rather than marginal.

"Seeking Truth beyond Obfuscation"

The importance of localization was, ironically, not lost on our RT followers. For them, it meant remaining aware of what they viewed as the parochial inclinations of the domestic national media they consumed. It emerged, appropriately enough, in their stance on foreign news. Unsurprisingly, Western legacy or establishment media were blamed for supporting the disastrous war on terror and other Western-led conflicts. Given Russia's own vocal condemnations of Western hegemonic aggression, our participants tended to feel that following RT would introduce healthy counterhegemonic content into their news diets to counteract the proestablishment media they felt they were force-fed in the West. They were aware, however, that international media including RT prioritize stories that serve the interests of their sponsoring states. Russia, they asserted, was no more the locus of objective truth than its Western adversaries, but without sampling localized (and thus distorted) versions of such truth, the authentic version, validated via informed, transnational juxtapositions, would remain forever submerged.

The sense among left-inclined interviewees that the Western MSM had abdicated their fourth-estate responsibilities, not least in their whitewashing of Western foreign policy outrages, fostered a desire to "seek some kind of truth beyond the obfuscation." In an interview representative of a patterned response, one participant claimed that the 2003 Iraq invasion was the "turning point" at which they began to mistrust the media and seek out alternative news sources. A second, similarly left-leaning person averred that the BBC and CNN "have their own NATO-funded view [and] will just apply the fog of war to those situations, as well to places like Syria or Iraq … or Afghanistan."

Several participants declared themselves as being "antiwar"—or as one person put it, a "peacenik hippy"—accusing the BBC of the deceptive pursuit of national strategic interests. One suggested, with the endorsement of two others, that "the biggest difference between RT and the BBC [is that] the BBC is just better at portraying their propaganda as … real and factual." These comments echo Simonyan's justification of RT's more "honest"

tendentiousness. They suggest that left-wing followers were driven to RT by what they perceived as the BBC's uncritical approach to Western military interventions and by RT's efforts to, in the words of one interviewee, "hold these buggers to account, so that they don't just go around slaughtering innocent people."

Deconstructing Impartiality

Russia's own war on Ukraine has, as our postinvasion data confirm, affected perceptions of both Russia and RT, but the channel's willingness to broach issues ignored by Western media and its exposure of the BBC's "political biases" continued to resonate, with two characteristic respondents acknowledging: "I do still look at RT. I realise that although they might give us certain stories that other news outlets don't, it seems that they are a propaganda for their own sorta company there; My opinion with the likes of the BBC is what my opinion has always been, they will push an agenda.… They will always make something … look worse than it is."

This finding affirms a view reported in previous research among the BBC's international audiences that the BBC exudes an "aura of objectivity" while successfully concealing British national strategic interests (Baumann and Gillespie 2007). For such followers RT served as an antidote and a tool with which to deconstruct BBC impartiality. One preinvasion comment was that "absolutely balanced, impartial news is … unattainable.… We inevitably must be partial in our selection of facts and biased in their interpretation. Without such partiality we wouldn't be able to say anything meaningful." The same person questioned whether Russian state funding of RT should worry him: "I don't understand why their being financed by the Russian state should represent something unusual.… Is the 'model of independent, professional journalism,' the BBC, not state funded?" Others proposed that RT's more openly propagandistic approach to news makes it *more* "honest" than the BBC:

> Hard propaganda is stuff like "the great leader produces ten thousand tractors this year, isn't this fantastic?" … I think RT maybe is closer to that kind of propaganda, whereas softer propaganda is more … subtle … it's like the BBC quoting the Adam Smith Institute to attack rail nationalization.… I think the BBC is … softer the way it goes about things, it's a bit more clever about how it puts across an agenda;
>
> RT must be the one that has the most unbiased reports, Russia don't give a crap if you hate them or like them because they're gonna carry on regardless.

The notion that "pure propaganda" reveals truths concealed by subterfuge and the conceit of Western impartiality was not uncommon among the more ardent of RT followers we spoke to.

Recentering Balance

If some RT followers reject concepts of impartiality and balance as dishonest, others take

the different tack of *accepting the concepts, but recentering the point around which they are constructed*. Balance from this perspective does not mean drawing a line in the center ground and sampling opinion marginally to the right and left of it. It implies reaching out to the far extremes of a wide spectrum concealed by the MSM. Praising the Russian broadcaster in this context, one focus group member suggested that "it seems like RT has a bit more of a balance. It's still not perfect but it's in the right direction." Balanced reporting in this light means not conforming to familiar Western caricatures of Russian news reporting as endless macho images of Putin and Soviet-style celebrations of increased tractor production. In contrast to such stereotypes, RT is perceived as a sort of center ground that reports more on the world than on Russia itself, as these three comments indicate:

> What I saw on RT news was not waving a flag for Putin, was not saying this is wonderful. No, it was covering this objectively;
>
> [RT]'s not offering up the strong President Putin on a horse or with a gun, bare-chested, wrestling bears.… So it's not overtly pro in that obvious sense, pro President Putin;
>
> There doesn't seem to be any daily indoctrination about you know, Vladimir Putin being the world's greatest man or that … I don't hear constant broadcasts about how wonderful Moscow is or Russia.

These comments indicate that the most popular and effective of RT's content was that which covered topics other than Russia, something our study in chapter 6 also indicates.

Here were also followers of RT who, problematically, felt that RT remained balanced by airing (without endorsing) views supporting COVID-19 anti-vaxxer rhetoric, antisemitic New World Order beliefs, far-fetched Syrian conflict narratives, and a belief in UFOs. One interviewee approved of RT's coverage of the Syria chemical attacks conspiracy theory that misattributes the atrocity to faked evidence supposedly concocted by the White Helmets volunteer organization: "I mean it's like a lot of the stuff that was going on in Syria and that, you know if there hadn't been [RT] listening to other journalists that were on the ground … we wouldn't have known that these chemical attacks were a load of balderdash."

By including such narratives in featured documentaries and within its news agenda, even if it presents them as nondefinitive, RT undoubtedly continues to serve as a sporadic vector for disinformation. Our postinvasion questionnaire, for example, suggests that the highly distorted narratives that RT and other Russian media outlets disseminated as a rationale for the "special military operation" resonated with some respondents, albeit tinged now with cautionary qualifications. One viewpoint blended objections to Russia's actions with the whataboutist perspective that Russia "had a damned sight more reason to go into Ukraine than we ever did when we invaded half the Middle East."

"One Big Continuum of Scary Russians"

The attraction that RT held not only for those who gravitate toward and embrace conspiracy theories but also for more conventional left-leaning participants was that it exposed hypocritical MSM oversights regarding purported Western imperialist

misadventures and offered a more rounded picture of the world. For example, a common refrain was "there is … a very western-centric view of the world if you look at western media.… Whereas on RT you tend to find out what's happening in the other 9/10ths." This perceived contrast is at odds with the largely Anglo- and Eurocentric focus of RT television news, though it is more consistent with RT online content and with RT's own branding. It served for participants as the legitimating context for RT's Russophobia narrative, which, as Wagnsson (2022, 12) confirms, was embraced by right-leaning populist Swedes who proved receptive to "the proposition that Sweden exaggerates the threat from Russia." Commenting on mainstream news representations of Russia, one left-wing participant likewise referred to it as "just one big continuum of … scary Russians." Two focus-group participants reflected on MSM portrayals of Russia:

> A: We're all slightly scared of Russia, and stories of Russia being scary go down well. And obviously we've got a reason to be, with the Salisbury stuff happening.
> B: It fits the narrative, doesn't it? And it's hard to know how much of that has an agenda behind it. Our culture is politically set up to see Russia as an adversary —everything from NATO, the Cold War, Russia is seen as …
> A: the enemy.

Others agreed that media reporting about Russia drew upon broader cultural representations of Russians as "hooligans … scary bouncers or spies." The villainizing of Russia was key in driving our participants to follow RT to gain what they thought would be fairer representation of, and insight into, Russian perspectives on global events. The fact that this aim accords with the traditional soft power mission pursued by Russia Today before it adopted its counterhegemonic RT identity reconfirms the durability of the Russophobia narrative and its capacity to bridge RT's various development phases. Importantly, however, the distinction between Russia and Russians, the state and the people, mattered for our participants who were alert to how RT uses the Russophobia of the West narrative to conceal the interests of Kremlin agendas (see Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021).

Yet the unifying, populist potency of the Russophobia of the West narrative emerged in the link our respondents made between the MSM's stoking of anti-Russian sentiments and its perceived downplaying of certain kinds of negative news about the United Kingdom. With RT, one claimed, "You've got that kind of report which tells you [about issues] as an alternative to what the mainstream report—specifically on poverty, unemployment, social exclusion … not covered as much in the mainstream." Like the poor, the excluded, and the deprived in domestic affairs, Russia, it is implied, is the external underdog, put upon by a political elite desperate to protect its privileges at home and abroad. By according RT emblematic status in the resistance to MSM arrogance, our focus groups confirmed the utility of the Russophobia narrative as an empty signifier capable of reconciling disparate ideological strands and, in the case of international events like the EU elections, performatively unifying opposition to an elitist behemoth across national lines. The effect on this function of the invasion of Ukraine was neither negligible nor decisive.

From Anti-woke Attraction to Critical Media Literacy

If the Russophobia theme exerted appeal to both progressive and conservative-minded followers, other RT concerns proved more attractive to the small right-leaning contingents in our focus groups. They appreciated RT's antiwoke credentials, believing that "RT also performs an indispensable role in taking a skeptical view on the emergent Woke ideology. … unlimited immigration, the absurd 'gender' proliferation and, not least, exposing as fraudulent the unhinged eco-warriors such as Greta Thunberg. In this respect, RT is doing immense service to all of us."[2]

The fact that these groups could, after February 2022, no longer rely on RT to promote their populist grievances did not mean that the grievances dissolved or that their proponents lacked other sources to feed them. Chapter 9 will highlight, as part of a larger ideological reconfigurement prompted by events in Ukraine, how in 2022 the Kremlin, along with RT, creatively synthesized its Russophobia and culture war narratives by incorporating objections to examples of postinvasion bans on Russian culture into the wider antiwoke campaign.

Mirroring the results of Wagnsson's (2022) survey, the right-leaning members of our focus groups exhibited political and social conservativism and Islamophobia. One accused Jeremy Corbyn, the former left-wing leader of the Labour Party, of being "a bigger communist than Putin and much more of a danger to UK people." Another complained melodramatically that Britain was "destroyed by Muslim immigration."

The coexistence of RT audiences from opposite ends of the political spectrum (albeit not engaging with one another) is consistent with standard views of RT as an opportunistic chameleon courting multiple audience interests, but this view overlooks the distinctive nature of RT's performative engagement with populism as part of a transideological unification strategy.

There is another component of this strategy to appeal to left and right. We have acknowledged that our interviewees skewed leftward politically, reflecting the fact that they were self-selecting and more likely to belong to a highly educated, progressive demographic comfortable with speaking to academics. The critical media literacy that comes with education was responsible for an ability within this group to engage with RT meta-ideologically, to account for the channel's apparent political eclecticism. One person maintained, "RT attracts people that are enraptured by populism of the right or the left—and, yes, RT news covers some of this." Others demonstrated insights into RT's limited pluralism strategy—its willingness to invite guests from across the political divide to participate in its debate shows to create a sense of balance. Some interpreted this embrace of the journalistic principles of legacy broadcasters as performative provocations. They pointed out that the appearance on RT of Nigel Farage and Katie Hopkins with left-wing voices like the LGBTQ rights campaigner Peter Tatchell was intended less to create balance than to stoke controversy. One participant suggested that RT may be demonstrating the media "equivalent of horseshoe theory"—the claim that proponents of far-left and far-right fringe politics share the dogmatic, binaristic thinking that informs populist rhetoric, another perceived ironic mockery in RT's reductio ad absurdum of a legacy broadcaster principle. These views are speculative and questionable, but they barely accord with generalized dismissals of RT audiences as populist dupes.

International News Omnivores

Many interviewees insisted on the necessity to consult multiple national news perspectives on global events and issues. By critically comparing RT coverage with that of other channels, they could gain new insights into what was happening worldwide and make up their own minds. The decision to follow RT was often portrayed as an effort to gain "an alternative take" on the news, wherein RT was used "as a supplement to several other sources." Rarely were these other news sources extremist, alternative, or niche media. Rather, and in keeping with the "reputable international news provider" component of RT's tripartite identity, they were highly regarded outlets including the BBC, Al Jazeera, CNN, the *Guardian*, and the *Independent*. Surveys conducted in other national contexts reveal RT audience profiles echoing its alternative media (alt-media) disruptor identity.[3] Yet qualitative interviews with RT Facebook users in the United Kingdom and separate Swedish ethnographic research corroborate our findings pointing to eclectic combinations of right- and left-leaning views and, within individuals, of alertness to RT manipulations with sympathy for the channel's political agendas (Hall 2022a; Wagnsson et al. 2023). Regardless of the validity of RT's own claims to offer global coverage, there is an obligation on researchers to adopt comparative rather than nation-based perspectives on its audiences.

Focus group members emphasized RT's coverage of issues underreported by the BBC in particular. When not emulating RT's use of the term "MSM," they identified the BBC and CNN as the main points of comparative reference. A common view was that RT "presents aspects of the news … that you wouldn't get elsewhere." Before the war, RT was widely praised by our interviewees for giving "a platform to people who would never get on the BBC" (though, as chapter 3 showed, these included highly disreputable individuals) and/or also covering stories concerning economics, social affairs, and conflict in ways that other outlets did not. One participant appreciated RT's attention to socioeconomic problems. Others appreciated the insights into "business stuff … the stock market and things like that" exclusive to RT's idiosyncratic financial affairs program, *The Keiser Report*. One postinvasion respondent regretted the new access restrictions on RT because it alone had provided in-depth coverage of "special interest topics like crypto currencies," which has proven popular beyond RT's UK audience.

The breadth and depth of news reporting and the orientation to international audiences and their interests was also deemed to be integral to RT's "alternative perspective." One interviewee noted that RT had "a really good wide selection of topics.… It's not all just about Russia.… It's all topical news and very important documentaries from around the world especially the mini documentaries."

Regular RT users, who see themselves as international news omnivores, appreciated what they saw as its eschewal of Eurocentrism and its simplistic, direct portrayals of Russian interests, as well as the broader optics it provides on alternative diplomatic and trading alliances: "They report quite a lot on the BRICS countries, not just Russia but China and India and so on, whereas if you compare it to something like even BBC, a lot of the focus is on Britain and America."

The gauntlet that RT was credited with throwing down to the provincial parochialism of its rivals has been challenged by perceptions of its deep complicity in Russia's war on Ukraine. Again, though, the need that it was hitherto deemed by its audiences to have

fulfilled remains. Our postinvasion respondents, most of whom admitted that they can or will no longer follow RT, listed an array of sources to which they now turn for counterhegemonic perspectives. These included a mix of reputable outlets such as the *Guardian*, Al Jazeera, and LBC News and alt-media such as Democracy Now, the *Saker*, Rumble, Zero Hedge, Paul Craig Roberts, the Rumor Mill, State of the Nation, Redacted, the New Atlas, Scott Ritter, Earl Grey, Alexander Mercouris, the Duran, Jimmy Dore, Russel Brand, and George Galloway's YouTube channel—many of which are highly conspiratorial. The minority who continue to follow RT relied on its smartphone app (for which preinvasion installations continued to function), the Tor browser, or obscure streaming platforms capable of circumventing restrictions such as Odyssey. Reactions to the restrictions were negative, with some even claiming: "As someone who grew up under communism, I feel that I live under a totalitarian regime once again. Absolutely, utterly incompatible with liberal democracy" and "It is a violation of the liberal and democratic value of free speech!"

We provide a fuller discussion of the implications of postinvasion bans on RT in chapter 9.

"I Want to Know What the Russians Think!"

Even before the invasion of Ukraine, there were few illusions among our interviewees about RT's relationship to the Russian state. For interviewees receptive to RT's Russophobia narratives, the channel was useful in presenting "the positive side of Russia." This group was thus by definition aware of RT's biases but chose not to condemn it for them. In the words of one member, "The media that's put out there is going to cover international events through the eye or the perspective of the nation itself. Russia Today does, RT news does do that absolutely." As for many other interviewees, this practice was seen as neither unusual nor illegitimate. As one put it, "I want to know how and what the Russians think—that's why I watch RT." This motivation persisted, or even strengthened, after the invasion of Ukraine, as the respondent who accesses RT via Odyssey illustrated: "I watch it for its coverage of NATO and I'm interested in Russian history. There's not much about Ukraine but if there is, of course it's from a Russian perspective. Would we expect otherwise? Isn't that true of all news media?"

Most participants were aware of RT's pro-Kremlin bias but balked at the idea of it deliberately promoting Russian propaganda or fake news: "I don't think it spreads fake news, it just covers it in a slightly different way." There was an equally strong awareness that, although by blending its output with the wider antiestablishment agendas of other counterhegemonic channels RT avoids promoting Russian policy directly, state interests blatantly infused its Russian domestic coverage. For one interviewee, "Their reporting on Russian politics can be a bit dodgy but that's to be expected sometimes." Another commented: "I haven't watched RT to find out what's happening in Russia.… I feel that that would be the least objective reporting.… Would I take RT's view of Russia very seriously when it's designed for an international audience? Probably not."

Ultimately, the vast majority of RT followers we spoke to were aware of its biases and claimed they could either "read against the RT grain" or dismissed this phenomenon as

being true of all news media. Such comments highlight the imperative to be precise and consistent in applying terms like "disinformation" and "propaganda" (Miller and Wilde 2022), whether to RT or to other actors; if media content strikes its audiences as transparently propagandistic and biased, it struggles to meet the criterion of "deception" required for any parsimonious definition of disinformation. A number of our RT followers considered it to be exceptionally biased and politically parochial. Only a tiny minority saw RT as unbiased, objective, and impartial in its news reporting.

"Fomenting Discord"

The keen awareness of RT's tendentiousness among its audiences and displays of those viewers' media savviness across our interviews brings into question the stereotype that RT audiences are passive, impressionable victims of Russian disinformation—as if mere exposure exerts a powerful influence and as if disinformation production and consumption are homologous and mutually complementary processes. Indeed, an acute awareness of state influence on RT was central to the interpretive strategies of its UK audiences. It was not unusual to hear focus group members describe RT's content as influenced by the Russian state and the channel as "a foreign policy instrument." One participant noted how RT gave airtime to those who supported its adversarial agenda: "It gives people a platform where they are, on the fringes of politics, but I'm also aware that they're not doing it out of the goodness of their heart.… They're doing it because they're attacking the British state."

This interviewee indicated sympathy with RT's progressive angle on certain stories and approved of its advocacy of social movements aspiring to tackle injustice while at the same time expressing doubts about its sincerity. He characterized RT's news reporting as "quite embarrassing," adding:

> A: I'm not denying that … news sources from the West are biased.… But I don't think they have quite that level of just … propaganda-produced nonsense on that scale.… It (RT) was basically just a foreign policy instrument for the Russian state.

Others went further, referring to RT as "the voice of the Kremlin" and "a propaganda arm of the Russian government." In another focus group, two people described RT as

> A: part of the whole Russian thing of trying to, sort of, foment …
> B: discord.

Generally, there was wide cognizance of the fact that RT strove, in one person's words, to "grab … legitimacy amongst the international left" and "to reassert the fact that Russia should have a center-stage position" because RT "makes Russia look important, and if you're young and countercultural, this might make you feel empowered." Thus, there were few illusions about RT's strategy of targeting the sensibilities of younger digitally savvy generations for its own ends.

"Reading between the Lines"

Among critically aware insights offered were acknowledgments that "RT is still trying to define America as a demon." One person elaborated as follows: "It's subtle, but they are biased. I mean … when they ever do anything Russian it's all wonderful. When they do elsewhere in the world they're always looking to attribute blame."

A key pattern of response among younger digitally savvy users was admiration for the creativity RT displayed in special projects like 1917LIVE, or its "boots on the ground" perspective on the Syrian conflict, or its FIFA World Cup coverage from the angle of fans—a fondness for projects that capture the people's perspective. It was seen as entirely possible to follow RT without succumbing to its propaganda. As one interviewee put it when discussing RT's Syria coverage: "You know I'm not a fool. I'm not an idiot. I don't sit there going 'yeah everything that they're [Russia] doing is you know for peace and love.' " Another insisted, "You just have to be grown up about it and accept that viewers can discern things for themselves."

At times followers laid claim to well-honed media literacy skills enabling them to navigate RT's cunning hybrid of news and propaganda. One claimed: "They have a perspective, you know you've gotta read between the lines." Another openly referred to RT as "propaganda" but continued: "You look at what they're saying and you look at what our side are saying, and then you can extrapolate things from that and work out what's going on … that's why I don't generally have much time for the whole argument, 'It's just complete bullshit.' I mean, it's bullshit, but there are lots of things that are bullshit out there."

Fruitful engagement with RT demands, according to users, a critical tool kit and a healthy skepticism that many lack but which they apply without favor. Our findings thus support those of Wagnsson et al. (2023), who present an RT audience typology based on postinvasion data and including categories of Distant Observers (critical followers who watch RT to corroborate their prior view of it as a Kremlin propaganda weapon), Reluctant Consumers (those who are skeptical about all media but agree that mainstream outlets are more trustworthy than RT), Media Nihilists (people who treat all media as equally suspect), and Establishment Critics (those who regard RT as providing vital perspectives missing from MSM coverage). Most of our own small number of postinvasion respondents fell into the latter two categories, as typified by the following two complaints: "I feel the coverage of the war has been quite hazy other than the initial invasion, it feels like the media are only showing Russia's assaults or defeats and not showing how the UN is reacting," and "The UK's a broken country and there's not a news channel out there that is capable of telling the truth … though Channel 4 might have been almost there, but it's all kind of just games innit?"

"Surprisingly Un-RT"

Appreciation of RT's subversive reengineering of the MSM commitment to balance was accompanied by admiration for its capacity to match MSM professionalism: "It's a product that clearly benefits from a lot of technical expertise. It's very smooth in the way it's produced … graphics are excellent," and "It's very crisp … very easy to digest." RT's

perceived professionalism thus appears to enhance its general reliability as a news provider.

Respondents likewise approved of RT's droll humor. One praised its autocritical advertising campaign, indicating the appeal that RT's populist pariah identity strategy holds for audiences mistrustful of certain Western institutions: "I did actually really like the ad campaign they did recently. I know it's very, like, cheeky.… It had big posters and it said stuff like, 'The CIA call us propaganda.' "

Other interviewees were attracted to RT's ironic style and comic content. Typical were comments like the following on the alternative comedian Jonathan Pie, whose short videos were originally licensed to RT: "I think initially RT started sharing some of his earlier ramblings, and I thought 'Oh I like this' and by association I liked them, y'know? So that's what got me into it, and then News Thing came off the back of that."

Like Slavoj Žižek, whose unique brand of philosophical drollery proved a regular feature of RT's prewar output, Pie has had no problem in finding alternative outlets for his creativity, including BBC Radio 4. So while there may be a strong rationale for restricting access to RT, there should be no illusions that such action silences the voices it relied on to bolster its appeal. This is abundantly apparent from comments made in response to our November 2022 questionnaire: "I don't need to trust any news media- everyone has its slant. I don't trust any news. I trust my own judgment which I come to after watching different perspectives," and "It wasn't long ago the BBC wanted Ukraine done for war crimes against its Russian speaking civilians in Donbas. Ross Kemp even did a story on the Nazi Azov battalion. Now it's nowhere to be found. Ukraine are being used to fight a war for the West.… You can't trust anyone with truth."

As we have argued elsewhere (Hutchings 2020b; see also Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021), ironic humor was central to RT's #1917LIVE Twitter project. The project's value as a unique form of historical reenactment and genuinely innovative qualities resonated with many interviewees, who were struck by its apparent lack of a political agenda. Two focus group members explained this phenomenon in terms of RT

> A: … attempting to rehabilitate its image that it's tongue in cheek and that it might soften people's perceptions of Russia Today rather than it being a serious thing.
> B: It was oddly un-RTish, in that sense.
> C: Yes.
> B: Compared to RT's coverage of everything else that involves Russia it was actually quite open, the discussion.
> C: It was un-RT.

Another described #1917Live as "about selling the idea that Russia is, like, a high-tech kind of thing," adding "you might say that they can grab the next generation by being a little bit more innovative than Al Jazeera or BBC." The project epitomizes the self-reflexive, performative nature of RT's communications strategy. If the autocritical advertising campaign worked to counter images of RT as a propaganda bullhorn by internalizing those images and reprojecting them with scandalizing irony, #1917Live achieved the same by rebutting such images with sophisticated, nonpropagandistic output. A recurring answer to our key question, "What is RT?," is thus self-negation or, to paraphrase our interviewees, "Non-RT."

Significantly, the Digital Innovations team behind #1917Live and the equally creative FIFA 2018 World Cup project has now been disbanded (Crilley, Kazakov, and Willis 2022).

There is little place for such soft-edged subtlety within the hard reality of Russia's war on Ukraine. Moreover, not even our preinvasion interviewees were fully swayed (or deceived) by RT's digital innovations. One commented: "I'm still highly suspicious of RT.… I'm not entirely sure what the RT agenda with this is—I'm not sure if it's just to get more engagement, trying to get people to watch RT—like … It's not gonna change my opinion of what Russia Today is."

For such followers, creative innovations and satirical drollery cannot free RT from the notoriety surrounding it: RT *is*, after all, RT, its wily, mendacious dissimulations aimed at discarding this burden merely reconfirming the US Department of State Global Engagement Center (2022b) account of its central place within the wider Russian disinformation ecosystem.

Escaping the Matrix

In revoking RT's broadcasting license in 2022, British media regulator Ofcom (2022) avoided the term "disinformation," referring instead to multiple "impartiality breaches." It held that it was impossible for a Russian license holder to simultaneously meet Russian legal restrictions on permissible reporting of the "special military operation" and Ofcom requirements for duly impartial coverage. The EU's parallel decision, by contrast, followed the lead of the US Department of State in citing RT's involvement in "systematic information manipulation and disinformation" (Council of the EU 2022). In defending the decision, the EU's top diplomat, Joseph Borrell, explained, "If information is systematically contaminated by lies *and twisted*, citizens can't have a clear understanding of reality and their political judgment is *similarly twisted*" (emphasis ours; Euronews 2022). This juxtaposition reveals that the scope of the term "disinformation" as applied to Russia, even in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, is no more settled than the place of RT within the "wider Russian disinformation system" that both the US Department of State and the EU invoke. For the EU, at least, it also highlights the assumed parallel between exposure to "the twisted lies" of Russian disinformation and the twisted political judgment of citizens of democracies who must hereafter be protected from the threat.

RT's audiences, we argued, are not only more heterogenous than common images of them indicate. They also fail to bear out notions, such as Borrell's, of their uniform vulnerability to information manipulation. Our interviewees know that RT acts as a state propaganda tool. Their political sympathies often shape the ways they engage with RT. Importantly, the overwhelming majority of interviewees argue that their media literacy skills empower them to distance themselves from RT's propaganda alongside other "biased news sources" across the MSM. Far from naively believing what they are exposed to, they escape manipulation via the kinds of interpretive processes and reasonings illustrated above. They express confidence that they are unplugged from the illusory matrix, to invoke the cult movie that presents a dystopian view of the future and that, as Taylor (2021) suggests, inspires conspiracists and alt-media followers more generally. For digitally savvy consumers, RT *exposes* disinformation rather than *perpetrates* it—a conviction that Western media coverage of Russia's war on Ukraine only reinforced. Completing our postinvasion questionnaire with reference to BBC coverage of the war, two respondents

claim:

> The official, Establishment universe is one of thorough manipulation of information and deceit.… If I mention the slaughter of the inhabitants of Donbass [*sic*], I would be immediately dismissed as a "conspiracy theorist." But these are … verifiable facts … the only reason no one knows about them is because the Ministry of Truth suppresses the evidence;
>
> To see fraternal nations massacring each other on behalf of the Evil empire. I feel especially sorry for ordinary Ukrainian people who are being … used as "cannon fodder." … I cannot access RT.… But I have … expanded the previous net of my sources, so I am able to neutralize this Orwellian … attack on us.

Here the lexicon of Western counterdisinformation ("conspiracy theories"; "Orwellian attack"; "verifiable facts") is turned on its head. Moreover, even the large number of interviewees who distanced themselves from Kremlin narratives also mistrust Western news and avail themselves of RT to gain a better comparative perspective on world events and formulate their own evaluations. A minority follow RT counterintuitively, to remain alert to its malign propaganda (based on the Machiavellian adage to keep your enemy close). A key attraction is RT's antihegemonic agenda while remaining firmly cognizant of its ulterior motives to disrupt and foment discord in the West. Others openly criticize RT's propagandistic output while either finding intellectual gratification in their capacity for engaging with different viewpoints or appreciating the channel's resonance with their broader attitudinal stances, technical virtuosity, and creative grasp of online forms of satirical humor.

The widespread perspicacity we observed in regard to our interviewees' experience of RT's relationship with the Russian state indicates that disinformation does not necessarily disinform, undercutting Borrell's mirrorlike "twisted lies/twisted judgment" model of how news designated as disinformation deceives those who consume it. Among the minority of our respondents who endorsed Kremlin-preferred narratives, one in particular clearly articulated an identity as a "self-confessed 'conspiracy theorist' " as a driving factor in the respondent's choices and interpretation of media content. As for the majority of RT audiences we interviewed, their critical agency and interpretive powers should not be underestimated. Our sample of RT's audience skews toward those with high educational capital, though even those people we spoke to without any higher education qualifications expressed high levels of political astuteness and were attracted to RT's reporting of issues they felt were not well covered by other outlets—such as corporate crime, Bitcoin, environmental destruction, and the war in Syria. From those who had left school at sixteen to those who had PhDs, a common thread across our research participants was a mistrust of the MSM and the political elites of today.

A feeling of mistrust—exploited but not singularly caused by RT—enabled RT's media content to resonate with the audiences we spoke to, even if they did not then buy into the broader RT project. Our study shows that RT's use of humor, satire, irony, and other emotional media representations, from the horrors of Western wars to the injustices of Western societies (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020; Hall 2022a, 2022b; see also Saunders, Crilley, and Chatterje-Doody 2022), have given RT an appeal in places like the United Kingdom where strong feelings—of anxiety, anger, fear—have defined recent populist political upheavals such as Brexit. What was perhaps RT's key strength in recent years was

its ability to tap into and mediate broader public moods, or what Sara Ahmed (2004) calls "affective economies", that spanned the political spectrum and gave RT its appeal in an age defined (at least, according to popular perception and media accounts) by stark inequalities, horrific injustices, constant crises, and deaths and disasters that are now instantly mediated around the globe through social media. This chapter's qualitative audience research involved talking to actual audiences—so frequently dismissed as irrelevant in wider discussions of disinformation and propaganda—and attempting to understand why they follow and engage with RT. Their motivations furthermore shed light on the momentous clash *between* the values of liberal democracy and authoritarianism unleashed by Russia's war on Ukraine.

Our findings here anticipate the simmering tensions *within* liberal democracies that the Ukraine war foregrounded. For many interviewees, RT served as a useful component in the critical tool kit needed to deconstruct the confidence trick attributed to purveyors of what they saw as the liberal illusion of balance and impartiality. In contrast, some RT audience members drew on their experiences of following the outlet to challenge accepted principles like balance, impartiality, plurality, and diversity and recenter notions of balance. The perspectives and political sensibilities expressed by RT's audiences have less to do with the consumption and digestion of Russian propaganda and disinformation than with exposure to the fault lines within liberal democracy. The crisis of trust besetting states across the Western drives audiences to RT and other alt-media, their engagement with it further exacerbating that crisis that, our research indicates, appears to have outlasted the shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine world (Warren 2008; Krastev 2013).

The war, however, reminds us that balance and impartiality are not fixed absolutes and that objectively reporting specific events may necessitate partiality or at least the mediation of partialities—a point that is not missed by some RT followers. BBC *due* impartiality does not legitimate an extreme relativism that condones or gives equal weight to every point of view. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the "stolen elections" myth animating the Trumpian right are narratives that require firm repudiation to get at even an approximation of the truth. Our insights into the mindsets of RT's UK users nonetheless pose challenges to how we think about disinformation and its relationship with populism and liberal democracy. We will now pursue these challenges in the context of the epochal event that brought the clash defining that three-way relationship to a climax.

8

DISINFORMATION, IDENTITY DISCOURSES, AND WAR

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, saw the reconfiguring of the entire Russian, and to an extent Western, media landscapes. Subsequent bans and restrictions on RT across the West prompted the broadcaster to prioritize wider global audiences, who approach its content from contrasting political and cultural starting points and with different modes of, and motivations for, engagement. Political messaging on domestic Russian state media increased dramatically in the first two months of the war, squeezing out entertainment content almost entirely, though later months saw a partial retreat from this strategy (Alyukov, Kunilovskaya, and Semenov 2022a).

Restrictions and blocks on Russian television channels in Western countries were motivated both by disinformation concerns and by the perceived moral obligation not to support an aggressor state's war propaganda. The war revived fears that the Kremlin propaganda could threaten democracies—fears that had been overshadowed in the previous two years by concerns over China and domestic actors like the US alt-right. Disinformation is indeed a critical problem of our era. Yet the questions of how state propaganda works and how to counter disinformation effectively, including the crudest forms of disinformation such as overt fabrications, do not have straightforward answers. These questions are central to this chapter's analysis of how RT and other Russian state media covered Russia's war on Ukraine. It is precisely by juxtaposing RT, which prioritizes non-Russian audiences, with Russia's state media targeting domestic publics that we can best understand the narrative dimension to state propaganda. Through such comparative analysis, this chapter brings to the fore several of the key axes across which the argument

deployed in the book is constructed: Russian state media practices before and after the invasion of Ukraine and within and beyond the Russophone mediasphere, RT as both an instrument of Kremlin projection and as the point at which the identity dynamic in which Russia and the West are locked is particularly acute, and the workings of mediated populism under different political systems.

By the time of this writing, Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine had generated several studies that analyzed (1) Russian state-sponsored, war-related output across Russian and global hybrid media systems and (2) audience perceptions of this output. In adopting a predominant disinformation studies approach, Pierri et al. (2022) and Caprolu, Sadighian, and Di Pietro (2022) delivered a computational analysis of Russia-associated Facebook posts and tweets in the first months since the invasion. Typically, Pierri et al. 2022 classified all Russia-related output as low credibility/disinformation without studying its content. Alyukov et al. (2022a, 2022b) offered content analysis based on the frequency of key words in Russian state-affiliated media news coverage. Their studies additionally demonstrated how different social media platforms were used by state propaganda disseminators to target specific Russian audiences. Brandt, Wirtschafter, and Danaditya (2022) addressed this issue in relation to Kremlin-endorsed war messaging disseminated to US audiences. Wagnsson, Blad, and Hoyle (2023) analyzed the types of media users in Sweden who acknowledged consuming RT and Sputnik post invasion.

Some scholars attempt to ascertain how citizens react to Russian state propaganda and why. Ehrlich et al. (2022) correlated people's ability for "analytical thinking" with their susceptibility to "pro-Kremlin disinformation." Burtin's (2022) research, based on interviews in Russia, highlighted how expressing support for Russia's actions could serve psychological needs to deal with fear of an unknown future or shame in admitting that one's own country was at fault. Alyulov et al. (2022a, 2022b) illuminated public perceptions of propaganda by analyzing war-related key words used in genuine grassroots Russian social media accounts. The most detailed qualitative study of Russian citizens' perceptions of the war and their relationship to media-consumption habits was by Belokrysova et al. (2022), who, noting the unreliability of opinion surveys in a war context, conducted in-depth interviews with 213 subjects.

Belokrysova et al. (2022) and Alyukov et al. (2022a, 2022b) provided empirical evidence of relevance to this chapter. First, they corroborated other news consumption research by showing that Russian citizens often engaged with media to confirm their preexisting views. Second, they demonstrated that Russia's domestic political communication strategy amounted to "preaching to the converted," as the most intensive state-sponsored propaganda campaigns around the war were conducted on the Odnoklassniki platform used by older citizens, among whom support for Putin's policies was already high. Alyukov et al. (2022a) further suggested that Russian citizens used Kremlin-sponsored narratives as "frameworks for interpreting political events," often without attempting to construct coherent worldviews.

Alyukov et al.'s (2022a) Russia-related observation accords with what has long been argued by media consumption scholars. While many people quickly discard the factual details of news reports, they retain the "emotional tags" attached to individual pieces of information, remembering how they felt about what they heard and saw while forgetting specific details (Baum 2002). This explains why narratives capable of engaging people emotionally tend to solicit strong audience investments. Russian state actors exploit this

tendency (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019a).

How such narratives are constructed, particularly in the context of state propaganda, which includes overt fabrication, requires qualitative research targeting the political contexts in which these narratives are produced and the historical and cultural legacies with which they engage. As Kuo and Marwick (2021) rightly argue, such research tends to be limited because it is labor-intensive, requiring diverse linguistic skills—hence the prevalence of quantitative computational analysis in disinformation studies. Nguyễn et al.'s (2022) qualitative study demonstrates that the leveraging of recognizable "historical frameworks" can increase the salience of disinformation messages, documenting the utilization of legacies of Western imperialism by disinformation providers who target US diaspora communities. This chapter identifies a similar leveraging of "historical frameworks" in Russian state media output.

We contend that studying the narratives Russian state propaganda invokes as frameworks for interpreting war-related events requires qualitative research that transcends content analysis based on key word frequency. We must ascertain how state propaganda works in terms of the continuous discourses from which the narratives driving the Kremlin's versions of events are derived, understanding discourses as "the conceptual terrain in which knowledge is formed and produced" and narratives as "the everyday stories people tell within the context of institutional discourses" (Hook 2007, 2; Souto-Manning 2014, 163). The chapter adopts "narrative" rather than "frame" as our key analytical tool to avoid the tendency among media frame analysts to isolate frames from the collective, interactive processes that generate them (Borah 2011)—a flaw absent from the concept of "narrative" that, unlike "frame," also captures the linear, historical dimension to such stories.

Some differences exist in the adaptations of the studied narratives by RT's different services and domestic Russian media. This suggests the appreciation by authoritarian propaganda actors that what is perceived as a credible narrative is context contingent (cf. Kuo and Marwick 2021, 2). This context can be political, social, and linguacultural. Our comparison thus brings the contingency dimension of propaganda and disinformation into sharp focus.

Russophone critics of the war appear to share this appreciation of how familiar identarian discourses can feel true: when challenging the Kremlin's messaging, they consciously fill the same discourses with different meanings. This highlights another crucial dimension to state propaganda and disinformation: the acutely dialogical process by which these phenomena are produced and consumed in direct relation to *counter*propaganda and *counter*disinformation efforts.

In 2022, following the restrictions imposed on RT by democratic states, the network replaced its longstanding slogan, "Question More," with "Freedom over Censorship, Truth over Narratives" in certain online contexts. This disingenuous appropriation of the values postulated by Western IBs further underscores the appreciation of the power of narratives by authoritarian state propaganda actors, as well as the dialogical process from which such propaganda emerges. We stress that dialogism involves not merely responding to the Other's past pronouncements but also anticipating and prerebutting the Other's likely future pronouncements and allegations. This is of special relevance to actors, like RT, that operate within non-Russian legislative frameworks.

Sources and Method

Our qualitative analysis focuses on how, by adopting discourses whose meanings resonate within a given culture, Russian state propaganda strives to bolster "the truth status" of its Ukraine war narratives by ensuring that they match prior audience assumptions (Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano 2008). The discourses generate narratives pairing long historical roots with contemporary relevance. Hochschild (2016) termed such narratives "deep stories." In their account of deep stories disseminated by right-wing US media, Poletta and Callahan (2017) refer to their "allusive" qualities, their ability to "occlude the relationship between particular and general," to filter through a specific lens collective and personal histories and to adopt the form of a cozy, informal conversation with an audience addressed directly in the second person. These qualities were prominently displayed in Russian television talk shows during the first months of the war. They also characterized the social media posts of many Russophone war critics.

Our analysis of Russian state war propaganda output draws on three sets of sources chosen for their importance as reflected in studies of Russian media-consumption habits. First, we analyze statements by Vladimir Putin and his political advisers directing audiences toward the "correct" understanding of the invasion. Of particular importance are Putin's widely mediated article of July 12, 2021, and his invasion-justifying speech on February, 21 2022 (Putin 2021, 2022a). Of further significance are pronouncements by three of Putin's political aides, Vladislav Surkov, Vladimir Medinsky, and Sergei Karaganov, who share a conviction that Ukraine's separation from Russia is a temporary aberration. A week before Putin's speech of February 21, Surkov (2022) provided his own justification of the war. After serving as the Kremlin's public relations mouthpiece in 1999–2011, from 2013 to 2020 Surkov acted as Putin's aide, with responsibility for policies toward Ukraine while maintaining that Ukraine did not constitute a legitimate entity and that its relationship with Russia should be imposed through "force" (Kazantseva 2021). In the run-up to the invasion, Medinsky, Putin's adviser on the politics of history and Russia's negotiator with Ukraine at the start of the war, represented Putin as a figure through whom the destiny that "God gave us" was being enacted (Medinsky 2021). Immediately following Putin's February speech, Karaganov, who heads one of the oldest pro-Kremlin think tanks and was international relations adviser to both Putin and Yeltsin, released a lengthy rationale for the invasion (Karaganov 2022). These figures offered the main discursive references for state media's war-justifying narratives (Alyukov et al. 2022a).

The discourses these figures draw on are grounded in Russian national myths that equate "Russia" with its empire and represent Ukraine as integral to Russia. Of czarist origins, they were modified in the Soviet era and questioned only superficially in the 1990s (Tolz 1998). They thus have a long durability, including during Yeltsin's era (Tolz 1998). Yet in the 1990s, foreign policy actions were underpinned by political realities, including the signing of the 1997 Inter-State Treaty in which Russia acknowledged Ukraine's current borders (Tolz 2002). In an indication of the importance of the conscious choices that politicians make when invoking (or not) specific national myths, Putin's government has actively used historical narratives in direct contradiction to current reality to justify regime-legitimizing policies, including war.

Our second source is the output of three main state-funded television channels, two aimed at domestic and one at foreign audiences. In the first three months following the

invasion, most of the output on the two domestic channels (Channel 1 and Rossiya) consisted of war-related talk shows, with the intermittent broadcasting of news bulletins. We followed the three shows that together accounted for the greatest amount of airtime—Channel 1's *Bolshaia igra* (*The Great Game*), and Rossiya's *60 minut* (*60 Minutes*) and *Soloviev Live*.

Television remains Russia's predominant news source. According to a November 2022 Levada Center poll, 64 percent of respondents mentioned *regular* consumption of television, followed by the internet at 32 percent. Importantly, the same poll demonstrated that only 49 percent trusted television news reporting (Levada 2022c). Alyukov (2022) and Szostek (2018b) documented how, despite distrusting Russian television coverage of Ukraine, when interviewed, viewers nevertheless reproduced its cliches.

To ascertain how narratives are articulated to appeal to specific publics, we systematically compared domestic television broadcasts with the output of RT's online news reports and op-eds in English and Russian. RT's reporting initially differed from that of its domestic counterparts, as well as across its language services. RT International continued to reflect a broader range of opinions than RT Russian and domestic television channels, calling Russia's actions against Ukraine an "attack" or "invasion," rather than the Kremlin-endorsed "special operation." RT International frequently deployed quotation marks to adhere to basic journalistic standards. Hyperpartisan positions were reserved for op-eds.[1] In contrast, RT Russian, aimed at Russophone audiences at home and abroad, cleaved more closely to domestic television coverage. Overall the war was prominent, but not necessarily dominant, on RT International news bulletins, which downplayed it in comparison to RT Russian, Russian domestic broadcasters, and Western media.[2]

Our third state-media source was RIA Novosti op-eds. Belokrysova et al. (2022) demonstrated that apart from television coverage, war supporters most frequently consulted RIA and TASS news agencies for information about events in Ukraine. These state-owned outlets are algorithmically prioritized by Russia's most used search agent, Yandex (Wijermars 2021). A one-week comparison of the outputs of these two agencies suggested a close similarity in the adopted narratives. Of the two, we chose RIA Novosti because of its propensity to publish bold op-eds that clearly spelled out the official line as the war proceeded.

We followed this coverage daily throughout the first three months of the war, shifting to focus on notable developments over the subsequent three months and creating a data set of invasion-justifying narratives. At the time, access to Russian state media output was affected by bans imposed in the United Kingdom. Channel 1's livestream (1tv.live) was accessible on iPhones via the Safari browser. Existing versions of RT International's news app remained accessible despite its removal from the Apple App Store; RT Russian's site also remained accessible in the United Kingdom. Rossiya's programs were accessed through VPNs and the Tor browser.

Russian state media narratives interacted with those of Russian-language oppositional media that, in principle, Russian citizens could access and that state propaganda actors needed to take into account as part of the dialogic (dis)information dynamic whose features we aimed to capture. We therefore monitored two oppositional Telegram channels, Solov'inyi pomet (Nightingale's Droppings) and Kremlevskii tsirk (The Kremlin's Circus).[3] Telegram has the largest component of oppositional output among Russian social media platforms (Alyukov et al. 2022b; Belokrysova et al. 2022). The two channels we selected

were specifically established by journalists, including some who resigned from state media after the invasion to challenge and ridicule state media propaganda. As a supplement, we followed the YouTube channels of Russian journalists critical of Putin, as well as *Novaya Gazeta* Europe, which interviewed prominent Russian antiwar citizens (Belokrysova et al. 2022). Within our data set, we traced war narratives identified through close reading of the sources of familiar identitarian discourses—historical, cultural, and civilizational.

We identified three recurring ideational-identarian discourses common to many contexts but with specific resonances in Russia: those of colonialism/decolonization (in which Russia is the colonized victim), imperialism (associated here with the terms "historical Russia" [*istoricheskaya* Rossiya] and "the Russian world" [*Russkii mir*]), and the imaginary West (articulated in the form of *kollektivnyi Zapad* and linked to the term "[neo-]liberal order"). During the first two months following the invasion, several different justificatory narratives emerged in the Russian mediasphere. They tended to reference the same set of discourses, however. The narratives often revolved around notions of "the [Russian] people" and "Ukraine," which served as floating signifiers linked relationally to specific meanings, and with reference to two further relationally interpreted concepts: fascism/Nazism and genocide.[4] In line with how "the people" are defined in populist communications (Aalberg et al. 2017; Block and Negrine 2017), Russian state media constructions of "the Russian people" deny diversity not only within the Russian Federation but also between contemporary Russia and Ukraine. The terms were evoked dialogically, including in response to accusations that Russia is itself a genocidal Fascist state.

We now turn to the three overarching discourses adopted by Kremlin-affiliated actors before discussing the meanings attributed to floating signifiers within the justificatory narratives. We then explore what happens when these discourses are used to critique Russia's actions, concluding with observations regarding the implications of our research for the study of state propaganda and for counterdisinformation practices.

The Discourse of Colonialism/Decolonization

Following the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), postcolonial reflections on Russia's imperial policies had little traction in Russian public discourse, particularly in its state-sponsored variant (Tolz 2020b). Yet, while it seems surprising that the Kremlin's and state media's dominant representations of the special operation prominently referenced colonialism and decolonization, this can be explained by the meanings attributed to the terms in the narratives that portrayed war critics as the West's "fifth column" and depicted the invasion as a defensive act designed to prevent a Western-inspired attack on Russia.

It is important to note that prior to the war (and the 2014 Ukraine crisis), Russian official discourse did reference decolonization and imperialism but usually using the globally accepted lexicon of international relations (the "Russia as a Great Power" narrative), soft power (the Russian world initiative), or international law (the "sovereignty" and "sovereign democracy" narratives articulated by Surkov as a subtle version of decolonization discourse). The war supplanted these more moderate variants with overtly

provocative narratives of imperialism and colonialism/decolonization (confirming the complex lineage of Kremlin messaging).

The creation of meaning around the concepts of colonialism and decolonization reflects the interplay between their prerevolutionary understandings, the Soviet interpretations of them, and their reinvention post 1991. A significant prerevolutionary take on colonialism is traceable to the Slavophile Aleksei Khomyakov, who complained in 1847 that Peter the Great's reforms had contaminated Russia's indigenous "internal life" with Western European influences, turning Russia into "a colony" (*koloniya*) of "European eclectics" (*evropeiskie eklektiki*). Paradoxically, the colonizers were for Khomyakov not foreign invaders using military force but Russia's own elites, who had internalized European ideas at odds with indigenous practices. Like future postcolonial theorists who emphasized the centrality of culture to European colonial projects, the Slavophiles saw Europe's cultural domination of the rest of the world as having more profoundly negative effects than military and political intervention. Several late imperial Russian authors, particularly in the émigré Eurasian movement in the 1920s, echoed this interpretation (Tolz 2020b). A Soviet Eurasianist revival dating to the 1980s underpinned many post-1991 Russian nationalist claims about Western intellectual colonization. In the context of Russia's war on Ukraine, Karaganov (2022), who has advanced such arguments since the 1990s, argued in a repeatedly promoted RT International op-ed that "we still don't have the courage to acknowledge that the scientific and ideological worldview we've had for the last forty to fifty years is obsolete and/or was intended to serve foreign elites." The claim that the denazification of Ukraine should begin with the decolonization of Russia, including liberation from its pro-Western cultural elites, was then echoed across the media outlets we studied (Savelev 2022), offering an adaptation of a common theme of populist anti-elite rhetoric.

The idea of Russia's political subjugation and early twentieth-century claims that Russia is the West's economic colony were also publicized (Tolz 2020b), following the collapse of the USSR, by authors who explain global developments through the prism of conspiracy theories. A good example is the prolific publicist Nikolai Starikov, who became an active participant in Russian television shows justifying the war. Since the early 2000s, he has complained that "Anglo-Saxons" imposed their colonial regime in Russia and that, whereas under Putin Russia gained more political sovereignty, it remained the West's economic colony (Starikov 2012; Sputnik News (Russian), October 8, 2021). As argued on NTV's *Primoi efir* and Channel 1, *Bolshaia igra* (April 26, 2022), the war in Ukraine was the liberation of Russia from "Anglo-Saxon colonialism."

Russia is simultaneously claimed to be liberating Ukraine from Western colonialism, a narrative foregrounded in Putin's prewar speech when he wondered whether Ukrainian citizens understood that "their country has been … reduced to the level of a colony [of the West] with a puppet government" (Putin 2022a). Putin's words were repeated throughout state media (Channel 1, *Bolshaia igra*, February 24, 2022; RT News, February 21–22, 2022).

In justifying the war, domestic television featured the two narrative variants of colonialism/decolonization discourse with equal regularity. On RT International, by contrast, claims that Russia required decolonization (in relation to Western influences) were rare (one such example is Karaganov 2022). Instead, colonialism/decolonization discourse tended to underpin narratives about Russia as a power capable of liberating Ukraine and the non-Western world from Western colonial hegemony (Kholmogorov

2022; Kovalik 2022; Timofeev 2022). As was already true for the Soviet era, today such discursive framing resonates with RT's non-Western audiences, as well as with Western far-left and, as chapter 9 demonstrates, far-right communities (Kovalik 2022).

State-affiliated media consistently project accusations previously leveled against Russia's political elites onto Ukraine, portrayed as a colony and instrument of the West against Russia. Echoing Starikov's claims that local elites in colonized societies trade the well-being of their own people for "beads" offered by the colonizers (Starikov 2012), Putin accused "the Ukrainian oligarchic elites" of making "a pro-Western civilizational choice … to safeguard billions of dollars stolen by the oligarchs from the Ukrainian people and hidden in Western banks" (Putin 2022a). Karaganov branded Ukrainian politicians "anti-national" and "corrupted by the West" (Karaganov 2022). This stereotypical perception of elites in societies "colonized" by the West, particularly their inability to act in the interest of their own nation, shaped expectations of how Volodymyr Zelensky and his government would respond to Russia's invasion, prompting one of the Kremlin's most significant miscalculations. It also highlighted the significant influence on Kremlin war propaganda of the identity dynamic we featured in chapter 4.

The Discourse of Imperialism

Whereas accusations of colonialism were reserved for others, the discourse of imperialism, like that of decolonization, was also applied to the Russian self. This unexpected utilization of imperial discourse was far more prominent on domestic television than on RT. The explicit depiction of Russia's own policy as a continuation of its historical empire building differentiated domestic media coverage of the war in Ukraine from that of the annexation of Crimea, when Russia's neoimperial ambitions were systematically denied and its actions described as the reunification of an ethnically defined nation (Teper 2016).

The imperialist discourse generated conflicting narratives within individual media outlets as well as across domestic media and RT: one presenting the Russia-Ukraine conflict as having been initiated by the West/United States and another depicting the special operation as a means of recreating a "historical Russia" congruent with the czarist empire and the USSR. In these two contrasting narratives, "imperialism" is filled with different meanings, associated, respectively, with the Soviet period when it was attributed solely to Western powers and to the czarist era when the transnational discourse of empire as a polity alleged its benefits for the colonized (Aust, Vulpius, and Miller 2010). From the 1930s onward (Tillett 1969), official Soviet discourse incorporated the idea of czarist Russia as the benefactor of its conquered non-Russian territories, and the discourse of benign Russian imperialism continues to resonate with Russia's domestic audiences today. Moreover, in justifying Russia's actions in Ukraine this discourse exploits the wounded pride experienced by Russian citizens following the USSR's collapse. This sense has informed state-sponsored ideational-identarian narratives throughout Putin's tenure (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016).

A correlation between state-sponsored identarian messaging and public perception is reflected in opinion polls. The Levada Center's polls on the issue of "Russian national identity" demonstrate growing popular acceptance of the imperially inflected identity. A

2018 poll found that 75 percent of respondents agreed with the proposition that "Russia should retain Great Power status," compared to 31 percent in 1999. The same poll revealed that the idea of the Russian people (*Russkii narod*) as "exceptional" and having "a special place in history" grew to 62 percent in 2018, compared to 13 percent in 1992. Finally, it confirmed that the imperialism discourse that underpinned war-justifying narratives by evoking historically distant events had strong resonance; the most common response (53 percent) to a question about what comes first to mind when thinking "about your people" (*o vashem narode*) was "our past, our history" (a significant rise from 34 percent in 1994; Levada 2019).

Unsurprisingly for the war context, accusations of imperialism also frequently targeted the United States. Ukraine and other states were portrayed as victims of the American imperialism that also threatens Russia. In these narratives the concept of imperialism was used interchangeably with colonialism. The Soviet-era cliché "the bestial grin of American imperialism" featured repeatedly both in the domestic media and RT (Kandelaki 2022), as this variant of imperialist discourse resonates among audiences both in Russia and abroad.

Representations of US/NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) imperialism as the most significant threat to world security created synergies linking Russian actors to the far left in Western societies and to anti-imperial sentiment in the Global South (Rutland 2022b). For example, Russian television channels, including RT International, publicized a statement by the Democratic Socialists of America branding NATO's "imperial expansionism" as an important root cause of Russia's invasion (RT News, February 28, 2022). RT Russian quoted a Bolivian politician when promoting the claim that Russia's military conflict with Ukraine was instigated by US imperialists (RT News, March 10, 2022). Chapter 9 discusses the related translingual circulation of populist disinformation tropes linking Kremlin anti-imperial discourses to US alt-right conspiratorial deep state narratives.

In relation to Russia itself, the discourse of imperialism played out in contradictory fashion. Domestic and IBs replicated coverage of the annexation of Crimea, repeating Putin's denial of any Russian imperial ambition in relation to the invasion of Ukraine. The rebuttals were particularly prominent on RT but also appeared in domestic media (RT News, February 22, 2022; February 23, 2022; March 5, 2022; Channel 1, *Bolshaia igra*, March 5, 2022).

At the same time, across Russian (particularly domestic) television, RIA Novosti op-eds, and Putin's media appearances, we find (1) representations of Putin as one in a line of Russian imperial rulers; (2) unprecedented displays of Russian imperial symbols, celebrations of Russia's imperial conquests, and the systematic use of czarist-era terminology; (3) explicit calls to recreate the empire; and (4) debates around the location of the new borders of the expanding Russian state.

Above all, the lexicon of imperial discourse was invoked to strengthen the cult of Putin. The main purpose of RIA Novosti's main article justifying the invasion on February 24 was to situate Putin within the pantheon of Russian imperial and Soviet rulers (Alksnis 2022). Meanwhile, Putin's speeches were filmed against a golden statue of Catherine the Great as he quoted her statements on the conquest of territories that today constitute parts of southern Ukraine (e.g., Channel 1, *Primoi efir*, March 8, 2022).

Reflecting an intensifying trend toward the militarization of public discourse (Pynnöniemi 2021), Russia's imperial legacy was often represented via quotes from

imperial army officers, especially one by a certain Captain Gennady Nevelskoy to the effect that "any territory where the Russian flag has been raised at least once is Russian territory forever" (e.g., Channel 1, *Bolshaia igra*, March, 25, 2022). Meanwhile, in their RT op-eds Karaganov and the prominent Russian nationalist author Egor Kholmogorov evoked past Russian military successes in territorial battles with rival empires (Karaganov 2022; Kholmogorov 2022).

Unsurprisingly, domestic state media liberally called for the recreation of the Russian Empire, systematically deploying prerevolutionary terms, especially in the first two months of the war. Of particular significance is the term "historical Russia," which was equated with the czarist empire and the Soviet Union. Putin (2012) explicitly foregrounded this association in the *Nezavisimaia gazeta* article that launched his presidential campaign in 2012. Since then, references to *istoricheskaia* Rossiia as well as *bolshaia* Rossiia (great or big Russia) have appeared periodically in state-funded media. These notions were endorsed by Medinsky during his ministerial role and further referenced in Putin's July 12, 2021, article and February 21, 2022, speech.

Putin probably appropriated the term *istoricheskaia* Rossiia from his favorite Russian philosopher, Ivan Ilyn, who, like other authors from the post-1917 white émigré movement, regularly used it. While remaining critical of the Bolshevik government, White émigré figures saw the borders of the Soviet Union as "just" (*pravye*) because of their rough congruence with those of "historical Russia." Traceable to the conservative Russian publicist Mikhail Katkov, who in the 1880s reimagined imperial Russia in national terms (Oleinikov 2021), *istoricheskaia* Rossiia was a dominant discursive device in Russian domestic state media war coverage, legitimizing statements such as the assertion that by invading Ukraine, "Russia is coming to claim back its own" (*prishla za svoim*; Alksnis 2022).

The extremism characterizing the specific version of Russian imperialist discourse that played out in domestic media war coverage reflected the portrayal within that discourse of imperialism as a positive force. This context, with Russia advancing military goals openly associated with its great imperial past, accounts for the widely used and shocking concept of de-Ukrainization (Medvedev 2022). By openly embracing colonial subjugation, the term acquires potential genocidal meaning. It was therefore hardly surprising that certain Russian media personalities linked de-Ukrainization explicitly to the "legitimate" slaughter of masses of people, including a proposal by a prominent talk show host, Vladimir Soloviev, to kill "as many Ukrainians as possible" (Rossiya 1, *Soloviev Live*, April, 5, 2022; see also Sergeitsev 2022). Thus, the de-Ukrainization narrative provided the imperial counterpart to that of pseudo anticolonial denazification.

Following the invasion, the last vestiges of the staged pluralism that had earlier characterized political talk shows on Channel 1 and Rossiya 1 and that involved the inclusion of token participants with Kremlin-critical views was completely abandoned in the first three months of the war, though as Russia's military campaign began to suffer serious setbacks, expressions of dissent—some calling for still greater aggression, others questioning the wisdom of the special military operation altogether—surfaced periodically (e.g., NTV Segodnia, September 09, 2022). In the first months of the war, the main debate on domestic channels centered around the question of where Russia's imperial revanchism should stop. Prominent war supporters competed with one another in the outrageousness of their claims. For example, in his Rossiya 1 show, Soloviev suggested that he would have

preferred to live in the nineteenth century when "Poland, Finland and Alaska were ours" (*Soloviev Live*, March 28, 2022). On March 25, a significant segment of Channel 1's flagship show, whose very title *The Great Game* (*Bolshaia igra*) embraces imperialistic attitudes, was devoted to the issue of borders. Here, Vitaly Tretyakov, a 1990s liberal who in the 2000s had fallen in line with new Kremlin expectations, suggested that Russia might consider not incorporating parts of Western Ukraine that the USSR annexed in 1939–1945 within the borders it would "inevitably control." His position was rejected, however, as potentially "treacherous" (*predatelskaya*) by other participants whose territorial claims were more "patriotic" in their ambitions.

Given its different targeted audience, it is unsurprising that RT was more cautious in articulating support for the recreation of a state within Russia's former imperial borders. The term "historical Russia" was not invoked by RT services other than in the context of mediating Putin's pronouncements of July 2021 and February 2022. Karaganov's RT op-ed warned against "overextending" Russia into Eastern European states formally independent during the Cold War (Karaganov 2022). An RT International op-ed penned by Kholmogorov glorified Russia's imperial past but limited its current territorial ambitions solely to Ukraine, particularly its eastern part, describing them in the language of national reunification rather than imperial revanchism (Kholmogorov 2022; see also Timofeev 2022).

RT International's continued attempt at staged pluralism was reflected in its publication of an op-ed by the respected Russian political analyst Andrey Kortunov, who evoked the imperial discourse in order to depict Russia's war in Ukraine as the last act in the collapse of the Soviet Empire (Kortunov 2022), rather than its revival. This interpretation was so at odds with Russian official discourse that users' comments on RT's website included predictions that Kortunov would soon be poisoned with Novichok. Oppositional Russophone media echoed Kortunov's line.

Civilizational Discourse of the West

Narratives claiming that rather than starting an unprovoked war, Russia was only defending itself from external aggression and pursuing the just goal of denazifying Ukraine, have their roots in civilizational discourses widespread in postcolonial developing countries and positing an imaginary, unified, and generally hegemonic "West." In Russia the notion of a collective West (*kollektivnyi Zapad*) is commonly deployed. Contemporary identarian narratives resemble their historical antecedents in centering on discursive constructs of the West as both Russia's main Other and, occasionally, a component of Russian selfhood (see also chapter 4). This latter function supports narratives relativizing Russia's actions. The adjective "collective" emphasizes a West that includes all countries that followed the United States in imposing sanctions on Russia, including Japan and South Korea.

Alongside promoting broad, homogenizing concepts of a collective West, Russian state media also habitually differentiate the United States as the main culprit for global problems from "continental Europe," which is represented more positively and in contrast to the "Anglo-Saxon" or "Atlantic" bloc. This tendency to fragment the West was foregrounded in

state media coverage of potential disagreements between European Union states around sanctions against Russia.

In the context of the extreme anti-Western sentiment characterizing Russian public discourse since Putin's 2007 Munich speech (Levada 2022a), representations of a Western proxy war on Russia conducted via Ukraine appeared to resonate with Russian audiences perturbed by the effects of sanctions and the exclusion of Russian cultural and sports organizations and individuals from international forums (Burtin 2022). Such representations also played into anti-Western sentiments in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America (Rutland 2022b), hence their reflection in RT's output across its different language channels (Kovalik 2022; Lukyanov 2022). Responses to the invasion of Ukraine accorded unprecedented significance to notions of Western Russophobia dating to the nineteenth century and popular with Russian media actors since 2012 (Robinson 2019). Implicitly acknowledging the West's continuing hegemony, such critiques of Russophobia even resonated with conspiracy-oriented right-wing actors in the United States and elsewhere.

The civilizational discourse of the West underpins narratives predicting the inevitable collapse of the liberal world order (likewise a target of the global alt-right). These were important both in themselves and in terms of justifying the war. RIA's leading "international observer" predicted "the inevitable dismantling of the Atlantic world order" (Alksnis 2022). Karaganov mused that "the collective West" "cannot force itself to believe" that the dominance of the liberal order was coming to an end (Karaganov 2022). Across Russian state television, viewers were invited to share the ecstatic realization that this end was in sight and to derive pride from Russia's purported rise as "an agent of cardinal change for the whole world" (Lukyanov 2022; see also Korovin 2022; RT Russian 2022a). Already ubiquitous coverage of the West's "moral degradation—its rejection of history, homeland, gender, and beliefs," as well as its "aggressive LGBT and ultra-feminist movements" (Karaganov 2022)—increased still further after the start of the war. Domestic state media and RT treated anti-Russian sanctions, for example, almost exclusively with reference to their impact on Western societies.

On occasions, however, Russia aligns itself with the West, especially in narratives aimed at Anglophone audiences. "The Russian operation is a mirror image of what the US and its allies have done more than once in recent decades in different parts of the world," argued the prominent political commentator Fyodor Lukyanov on RT International, echoing statements by Putin and the Russian Foreign Ministry to the same effect. Now, as in the eighteenth century, Russia learns from its Western teachers (Lukyanov 2022).

The meaning attributed by Russian state media actors to the "liberal order" resembles that assigned to it by the (far-)right in Western countries. A shared belief that traditional Christian values are under threat facilitates synergies in interpretations of Russia's war on Ukraine. In the first three months of the invasion, publicity was accorded on Russian media to prominent US critics of the liberal order, including the Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson and the Republican congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, both of whom attacked the Biden administration's position on Ukraine (RT News, March 18, 2022). Carlson's willingness to believe Russian official sources was widely aired by international and domestic Russian outlets (Pengelly 2022).

The Floating Signifiers of War Narratives

Narratives shaped by the discourses of colonialism, imperialism, and the civilizational West featured frequent references to the Russian people (*Russkii narod*), Ukraine, fascism/Nazism, and genocide. These terms acted as floating signifiers, capable of attaching themselves to different meanings required in specific contexts (Lévi-Strauss 1987). The unusually fluid meanings attached to "Ukraine" were articulated in reaction to a peculiar situation. According to the perception of Putin and other Russian policy makers, Ukraine's very existence is an affront to propriety; the discursive denial of Ukrainian nationhood here collides with reality. The fluctuating definitions of "Ukraine" in Russian state media, which have oscillated from positive (as "part of Russia") to negative (as "anti-Russia"), correlate to the fluctuating attitudes of Russian citizens toward Ukraine recorded in Levada's polls since 2014 (Levada 2021).

Objections to Ukraine's rightful place on the world map were already implicit in Putin's 2013 Valdai speech (Putin 2013). Against this backdrop the notion of the Russian people has been redefined in Kremlin discourse. Official relegitimation has been accorded to three terms associated with the czarist period—the triune Russian people (*triedinyi russkii narod*), the pan-Russian (*obshcherusskii*) people, and the big (*bolshoi*) Russian people, combining the entire Slavic population of the empire (Putin 2021; Alksnis 2022). These terms lacked traction during the Soviet era when a separate Ukrainian nationality was officially recognized. In the first weeks of the war, they recurred repeatedly throughout Russian domestic media, but owing to their lack of resonance for foreign audiences, they were avoided by RT, other than in its Russian-language output and in the context of mediating Putin's statements (RT Russian 2021). Here, as so often in our book, tensions within RT's coverage encapsulate its position at the intersection of the Russian media ecosystem and global information flows.

The reappearance of the terminology of the triune Russian nation in contemporary Russian public discourse dates to the 1990s, when it was used almost exclusively by figures widely viewed as extreme radicals (Tolz 1998). Notably, in 2010, three years before Putin's decision to proclaim Russians and Ukrainians as part of a single nation, even the state-funded Russian World Foundation, which from its establishment in 2007 has been prone to equate "Russia" with its empire, described the view soon to be adopted by Putin as an "extreme position" (Russkii Mir 2010).

The corollary of an absent Ukrainian nation is an illegitimate Ukrainian state. On the eve of the invasion, state channel Rossiya 24 presented a map depicting the territory of "Ukraine" contained within its "legitimate borders" (Zinchenko 2022), marking a piece of land far smaller than the existing state as "Ukraine." The remainder of that state was represented as "gifts" from Russian czars and Soviet leaders. The multiplicity of meanings attributed to "Ukraine," depending on the political needs of the moment, were visualized in numerous other maps to be found on pro-Kremlin internet sites where the country appeared within diminished borders or disappeared altogether.[5]

The deep-rooted notion of Ukraine as integral to Russian selfhood expressed in assertions such as "Ukraine is our historical land" and "Russia perceives Ukraine as part of itself" has been a cornerstone of the Kremlin's narrative for a decade (Putin 2021; Alksnis 2022; Kholmogorov 2022). It is by no means a single-handed creation of the Putin regime; the sense of Russia's historical unity with Ukraine shaped the perceptions of Russian elites

and publics throughout the 1990s, with leading figures, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his time a globally celebrated hero of dissident resistance to Soviet oppression, expressing growing frustration with Ukraine's desire for independent statehood.[6]

An important, yet transient, change in the representations of Ukraine within Russian public discourse occurred following the signing in May 1997 of the Russian Ukrainian Inter-State Treaty and, particularly, its ratification by the upper chamber of the Russian Parliament in 1999. In this context, for the first time, popular media outlets began attributing separate and distinct histories and identities to Ukraine and Russia. Of particular significance was the appearance of new historical narratives that located the origins of Russian statehood not in Kyiv but in the centers of medieval Rus located in the current territory of the Russian Federation, such as Novgorod and Ladoga. This recognition of new geopolitical realities was short-lived, however, and by 2002, revisionist accounts of Russian-Ukrainian relations began to disappear from popular media (Tolz 2002).

When Ukraine recaptured the attention of Putin's elites, understandings of the origins of modern Ukrainian nationhood began to reflect a late czarist interpretation attributing Ukraine's separate identity to anti-Russian intrigues involving the Habsburgs, the Poles, and the Germans, as well as to Lenin's nationalities policies, which were interpreted as having been designed at the expense of the former empire's ethnic Russian core. This interpretation has systematically underpinned Russia's policy toward Ukraine in the past decade against the backdrop of the republishing of, and extensive quoting from, texts of the white émigré movement whose view of Ukraine as a historical anomaly is shared by current Russian politicians and media figures (Kuzio 2022; Volkonsky [1920] 2015).

Another variant of the historical anomaly narrative is that of Ukraine as an "Anti-Russia"—both an illicit negation of the idea of Ukraine as integral to Russian selfhood and a reflection of portrayals from a bygone era of Ukraine as the product of an anti-Russian conspiracy. The expression "Anti-Russia," common in official discourse on contemporary Ukraine, became a political meme following its use in Putin's July 12, 2021, article. It was, however, coined at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century by a group of officers from the Russian and former Soviet security services who authored several books centering on Western conspiracies to destroy Russia in a series titled Project Anti-Russia (Proekt AntiRossiya).[7] The concept vividly illustrates the contradictions and narcissism underwriting much contemporary Russian identity discourse—its struggle to recognize that which is non-Russian and different as anything other than an extension or an inversion of the sameness of the Russian self, with both Ukraine and the West oscillating between these two functions (Hutchings 2022). The oscillations are driven by attempts to appropriate an eclectic legacy, including prerevolutionary sources, anti-Communist White émigré literature, and writings by former KGB and Federal Security Service (FSB) officers.

Perceived as constituent members of *Russkii narod*, the Ukrainian people are contrasted with the country's elites, who are also represented in a contradictory manner. In narratives grounded in the discourse of colonialism and decolonization, they appear as corrupt individuals who serve "the collective West" as a colonial power and who have "no national idea to fight for" (Karaganov 2022). In contrast, in *kollektivnyi Zapad* narratives derived from the civilizational discourse of the West, Ukrainian political leaders are described as "poisoned by the pathogen of ethnic nationalism" (Karaganov 2022).

The latter is then equated with fascism/Nazism and represented, like liberal democracy, as a Western invention alien to Russian cultural and political traditions. Russia's proclaimed

goal of denazifying Ukraine was thus presented similarly by RT and domestic media as its simultaneous "de-Westernization" and its return to the Russian fold. The fascism/Nazism accusation, with reference to the genocidal practices of Nazi Germany, represents a particularly powerful form of othering in the Russian context given the legacy of World War II, which Putin's government turned into post-Soviet Russia's key foundation myth two decades ago (Hutchings and Rulyova 2008). The accusation of genocide was systematically leveled against Ukraine and denied explicitly or implicitly in relation to Russia (Latyshev and Medvedeva 2022; RT Russian 2022b, 2022c; RT 2023). Powerful identarian discourses and national myths can be also used by critics of state policies to challenge government control over messaging, however. Even within Russia this criticism cannot be fully silenced.

Countering Disinformation through Discursive Inversions

War critics appreciate the importance of rebutting the underlying discursive framing of official war-justifying narratives. Oppositional channels on Telegram and YouTube more often ridiculed state-sponsored pronouncements and inverted their meanings than merely fact-checked them.[8] This vividly illustrates a general principle of our book: effectively countering propaganda and disinformation requires engaging with pernicious narratives from within the very discourses that generated them, not just slaying falsity with the sword of truth. Propaganda/disinformation and counterpropaganda/counterdisinformation thus operate in an acutely relational meaning structure. In our sample the war critics actively repurposed the discourses of imperialism and the West as Russia's Other. The invasion as a means of revising an imperial "historical Russia" was recast as "the last act of Russian imperialism" presaging the potential breakup of the Russian Federation (Albats 2022; Pivovarov 2022; Shevchenko 2022; Yakovenko 2022)—a more acute articulation of Kortunov's out-of-line RT International argument.[9] The West as Russia's Other was repurposed in oppositional Telegram posts contrasting the economic inferiority of run-down Russian towns with prosperous Western ones and the military inferiority of its Soviet-era military equipment with those made available to Ukraine by NATO.

Similar discursive inversions were made in visually illustrated posts titled "The Russian World." This identarian pro-Kremlin concept dating to the first decade of the twenty-first century is overtly irridentist and promotes a benign view of Russian imperialism, also implying Russia's uniqueness and superiority over the West (Laruelle 2015). Oppositional Telegram posts offered alternative images of the "Russian world," depicting either the Russian army's destruction of Ukrainian settlements and people or the ruinous state of Russian towns. Over the war, Russian state media's replacement of "Russian world" narratives with those of "historical Russia" may well have been a response to this satirical critique, further demonstrating the dialogistic process within which both propaganda and its antidotes evolve.[10]

The greatest informational battle centered on the floating signifier "fascism/Nazism." Ukraine also appropriated the legacy of the World War II, representing the current military conflict as its Great Patriotic War and the Russian forces as Nazi occupiers perpetrating genocide of the Ukrainian people. Ideas of Russia as a "Fascist state" have been deployed by

domestic Russian critics of the war too. Multiple Telegram and YouTube posts highlighted the Putin regime's "fascist nature," rapidly accumulating hundreds of thousands of endorsements, including from users who self-identified as Russian citizens.

State-funded Russian propaganda, including state television coverage of the war, enables Kremlin critics to portray Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a manifestation of "Russian fascism," for which the term *rashizm*, combining the words "Russia" and "fascism," has been coined. For example, in an interview on RT Russian, a Russian-backed separatist in Donbas spoke of Russians and Ukrainians as a single nation whose children deserved equal protection, adding that all children deserved protection if they were "born with white skin." Quickly removed from RuTube by RT's management, the clip nevertheless became available on Telegram and YouTube with RT's logo prominently displayed.[11]

With unprecedented volumes of political content being generated in a fast-changing environment, similar faux pas abound on domestic television. For example, a participant in a Rossiya 1 talk show made bizarre use of the term "genocide." Repeating the common claim that "Russians" were collectively subjected to a genocide organized by the United States that encouraged different groups of Russians to kill one another, he offered the following elaboration: "Imagine that you have cockroaches living in your kitchen. And you have managed to create conditions in which they start killing each other. You then keep feeding the losing side to ensure that the killing goes on for as long as possible" (Rossiya 1, *60 minut*, April 22, 2022).[12]

This imagery was not seen as problematic by the show's moderator, presumably because it had been legitimized by Putin, who in his earlier speech labeled critics of the war "insects" (Putin 2022b). While being televised live, Putin's speech was immediately depicted on social media, including in Russia on the oppositional channels we monitored, as signaling the launch of the Fourth Reich.

For Russian state-affiliated actors, some of the problem with adopting fascism/Nazism as a key narrative arose from the tension between Soviet official narratives of World War II and those in Putin's Russia. One consistently important component of the Soviet version of the war's legacy was the narrative of peace (Tumarkin 1994). A range of Soviet symbolic paraphernalia was produced around the slogans "No to War" and "Peace to the World." The view that there should never be another world war was sincerely embraced not only by many ordinary Soviet citizens but also by elites. Born in the postwar period, Putin and his entourage have no personal memories of the war capable of moderating their militaristic ambitions. During Putin's tenure, the myth of World War II has been used to militarize Russian society and to create a national self by viciously othering Russia's purported opponents (Pynnöniemi 2021). Soviet postwar peace discourse has no place in today's state-sponsored narratives and commemorative practices.

This allowed domestic critics of the war to use Soviet antiwar slogans to protest Russia's actions in Ukraine. A Soviet cartoon still available on YouTube in which children discover a sunken Nazi cruiser sporting an engraved letter *Z*—the approved symbol of Russia's "special operation"—offered war critics the opportunity to highlight a surreal presaging of Putin's own fascism/Nazism.[13] This oppositional adoption of identarian discourses troubles Russian authorities, as repressions against Russian citizens who publicly invoke Soviet antiwar symbols indicate. They are accused of disinformation even when they make no explicit reference to Russian military actions in Ukraine. The persecution of these critics results in a paradox whereby, amid complaints that the West and the Ukrainian elites are

trying to "cancel" Russian culture, the systematic suppression of Russian antiwar sentiment effectively cancels key elements of Soviet culture, the current state propaganda references to the USSR as "historical Russia" notwithstanding (OVD Info 2022).[14] Moreover, by May 2022 the state media began referring to Ukraine's denazification as the main goal of the special operation much less frequently than in the previous two months, in apparent recognition that this aspect of state appropriation of the World War II legacy failed to resonate with the Russian public (Alyukov 2022).

Russian state media actors appreciate that state propaganda, including disinformation, works at the level of discourses and narratives as well as that of individual facts. Where Western democracies often focus on correspondence to facts (which are open to manipulation, selective representation, and distortion), effective counterdisinformation requires the discursive sources of disinformation narratives to be identified—something that certain Russian oppositional actors have intuited well. Narratives classifiable as disinformation are complex discursive constructs that work beyond the level of factual details. When producing narratives containing multiple factual distortions, Russian media actors carefully embed them within familiar historical and cultural discourses and populate them with floating signifiers filled with meanings whose resonance with audiences is understood to be highly important. Since 1991, Russian state spokespeople, especially under Putin, have linked the great power status that elicits nostalgia in many Russians with imperial and Soviet legacies. For foreign publics, in contrast, Russian international media outlets, such as RT, foreground the West's imperial legacies and colonial policies. Within official justifications of the war, the dominance of narratives grounded in identarian discourses indicates a keen appreciation by Russian elites of the importance of identity issues in global politics more widely and of the affective force of populist media communication styles that exploit the emotive power of identarian claims.

When war is experienced as a subspecies of the reality TV genre, the ability of its "producers" to lend it familiar meaning with popular resonance helps audiences create an imaginary picture of what they are witnessing that feels coherent and to which they can subscribe. The self-reinforcing logic provided by powerful populist narratives with deep cultural roots protects imaginary realities from external challenges, including unsettling factual evidence. This phenomenon applies not just to authoritarian contexts but also, as Polletta and Callahan (2017) illustrate, to global contexts.

Russia's state-affiliated actors, particularly domestic television channels, justified the invasion as a noble struggle to regain former imperial territories, evoking czarist-era thinking and terminology and discarding the twentieth century's history of decolonization. This history informed Lenin's understanding of nation and state building and subsequent official Soviet discourse. The Kremlin's current decolonization rhetoric, while marginalizing Soviet interpretations, is traceable to nineteenth-century Slavophile and anti-Soviet émigré thinkers in the form of a vision of the imperial West's devious plan to subjugate Russia. In parallel, Soviet appropriations of parts of Russia's imperial legacy further help legitimize representations of Russia's actions in Ukraine as the rebuilding of a historically progressive empire.

Western observers and many of their Ukrainian counterparts stress that Russia's invasion of Ukraine began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. For a proper understanding of how Russian strategic thinking mutates, however, we must differentiate state media coverage of the two events. The annexation of Crimea was justified as a

linguaculturally driven project aimed at Russian national reunification. In contrast, official Russian accounts of the 2022 invasion openly adopted the rhetoric of imperial expansion. Given Ukraine's purported status as integral to the triune Russian nation in the Kremlin-endorsed rhetoric, there was no compelling need to invoke Russian imperial expansion across Eurasia and Eastern Europe to justify the goal of destroying Ukrainian statehood. The rhetoric of national reunification deployed in 2014 would have been perfectly sufficient. The adoption of imperialist discourse offers some corroboration of Western perceptions that Russian expansion was intended to continue into other former Soviet states, for which notions of ethnocultural unity with Russia have far less relevance. Significantly, the critical failure to interrogate Russia's own legacy of imperialism in Russian state-sponsored discourses predates Putin's regime. It is the very embeddedness of imperial discourse within the wider Russian public sphere that renders it unlikely to attract criticism from regular domestic consumers of state propaganda. At the same time, in an indication that in Kremlin-sponsored information campaigns different state-affiliated actors play different roles, RT evoked imperialism as part of the decolonization discourse largely to depict the Western Other for its foreign audiences.

The fact that Russian narratives, mediated for both domestic and foreign audiences, dwell on the victimization of both Russia and Ukraine by US imperialism/colonialism enhances their credibility among left-wing groups in the West and wider audiences in non-Western societies where anti-American sentiments run high. Russian narratives that adopt civilizational discourses in critiques of the (neo)liberal order, the deep state, and postcolonial wokery gain traction among right-wing groupings in the United States and elsewhere. Disinformation is thus not purely an externally generated threat to democracies: it rests on the intertwinement of discourses whose imperial and antihegemonic tropes adopt locally specific forms.

Meanwhile, Russophone critics of the Ukraine war counter Russian state disinformation by generating alternative narratives from the same identarian discourses. Some of the adjustments in the Russian state propaganda lexicon noted in this chapter reflect the attention that state media actors pay to critiques of their coverage in the Russophone oppositional media space. We thus see how disinformation and counterdisinformation interact, creating a feedback loop that influences all sides.

To conclude, our analysis reveals how disinformation is (1) culturally, linguistically, and geopolitically differentiated in both its production and its consumption; (2) grounded as much in narratives and their umbrella discourses as it is in the gap between truth and falsehood; and (3) develops dynamically and dialogically in relation to rival narratives and even anticipations, evasions, and prerebuttals of what those narratives might claim. These three principles are relevant to all counterdisinformation efforts, but it is to the last of them and its implications for Western responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine that we now turn.

9

WAR ON THE LIBERAL (B)ORDER

We have distanced ourselves from the assumed trajectory of autocracy's descent into a propaganda-dependent totalitarianism doomed to eventual collapse that pervades discussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There is an inextricable link between the preference for post-factum, teleological accounts of unexpected developments and the comfort offered by clear dividing lines between a securely legitimated self and an irredeemably illegitimate Other. The West, according to such accounts, failed to foresee the invasion of Ukraine because it underestimated the extent of the Kremlin's devious, imperial ambitions—an oversight now rectified (Kalyvas 2022; Keiger 2022). This binarism manifests itself in the etymology of the primary brush with which neoauthoritarian aggressors are tarred; the West opposes Russian falsehood and *disinformation* with its own newly validated commitment to *information* and truth. Such binarism is amplified in the still starker teleology underlying Putin's own warped imperialistic account of Ukraine's inherent subjugation to Russia. In a postinvasion speech, he claimed that "any country, any people, any ethnic group should ensure their sovereignty. Because there is no in-between, no intermediate state: either a country is sovereign, or it is a colony, no matter what the colonies are called" (quoted in Hodge 2022).

Defenders of open-ended inquiry are not bound by the reductive alternatives with which Putin justifies Russian state violence. Analysis of the alterity associated with disinformation and state propaganda should be capable of acknowledging and accounting for the complexity and contingency of all forms of Otherness.

We must also, however, question a second linear narrative that has shaped *our* argument: that of Russian autocracy's messily uneven capitulation to the intractable logic of

mediatization. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has offered extensive corroboration of this logic. But like that of the predetermined trajectory of authoritarianism, it is challenged by a third development with its own unilinear form, and one at whose margins RT—the lodestone of our book—characteristically insinuated itself. Even as RT disinformation was lambasted by politicians across the liberal democratic spectrum, Putin's Ukraine narratives gained traction in the Middle East, Latin America, the Indian subcontinent, China, and elsewhere beyond the "unipolar world," whose supposed decay provides the plotline for one of Russia's own favored teleologies.[1]

Of equal significance is the way in which the same narrative penetrated the West's far-right alternative media ecosystem as it melded with deep state conspiracy theories. As Friedland (2022) points out, conservative Russian antiliberalism (a weapon that Putin brandished throughout the war—for example, in his smirking remark that Western "cancel culture" had now been turned against Russia) continues to inspire North American and European populists undeterred by Russia's outcast status. The central concern of this chapter is thus an assessment of how far Russia's invasion of Ukraine has disrupted its articulation with disinformation, populism, liberal democracy, and pariahhood—as well as the implications of this for the wider global order.

If, however, RT served as one interface between neoauthoritarianism and a global communications ecosystem whose infrastructure is underwritten by liberal democratic principles (including a commitment to free expression and truth), then Ukraine itself was the other such interface. Russia's invasion of Ukraine belongs to a different category than its earlier incursions into Syria and Georgia. It was an assault on Russia's "brother" nation (according to Putin, this relationship was the reason why Ukrainians needed to be "liberated" from Western-sponsored "Nazi" forces and reunited with their true "family"). Such thinking is incompatible with civic nationhood and sheds light on Russia's continuing struggle to construct a nation from the remnants of the contiguous empire it has been synonymous with for much of its history and whose foundation myth centers on ancient Kyivan Rus'. But this was also a war on the boundaries separating the authoritarian antiworld from a liberal democratic order of which Ukraine was simultaneously the "distant frontier" and the new yellow-blue flagbearer. The conflict destabilized identities at the heart of the liberal order as well as Russia. These ramifications inform this chapter's two fundamental questions:

1) How did the Russia-West identity dynamic play out in Western public discourses?
2) How did Western responses to the dramatically changing relationship between Russia, populism, and disinformation reconfigure the liberal order?

We treat RT as both a point of departure and a central actor. The bans imposed on it, and the reciprocal actions taken in Moscow, thrust it briefly to the fore of the wartime news agenda and, more enduringly, of the associated conflict of values as portrayed in the West—of truth against disinformation, free speech against repression, reason and decency against obscurantism and hatred. It is not our primary source of material, which is drawn from responses to the war by Western political, cultural, and media actors tracked over a period of four months (from mid-February to mid-June 2022) via the output of some of the figureheads of Western liberal democracy including the *Guardian*, the BBC, Open Democracy, *Prospect Magazine*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Newsweek*, and *Time Magazine*. We

integrate the discourse analytical approach taken to our sources with a computer-driven hyperlink analysis of the extent of interpenetration between Russian anti-Ukraine narratives and those of the alt-right and alt-left populists whom RT cultivates; the brief crisis into which American liberal democracy was plunged after the 2020 presidential election renders an assessment of the articulation of endogenous and exogenous threats to the liberal order equally urgent.

Disinformation with a Vengeance

The descent of the Russian mediascape into full-on repression and disinformation during the Ukraine war was not lost on the west. Emblematic was the speech of the leader of the UK delegation to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ian Stubbs: "[Putin's] government continues to peddle disinformation.… Those complicit in the Kremlin's unprovoked aggression and those who peddle its blizzard of lies … should be ashamed.… How can they stand in front of the mirror and look at themselves with dignity or self-respect? … Their part in the Kremlin's unprovoked, pre-meditated, and barbaric attack on Ukraine has led the Russian people into a quagmire.… Shame on them" (Stubbs 2022).

What distinguishes such statements from routine prewar condemnations of Kremlin deceit is the cause to which it is now tied: that of a brutal assault on Russia's nearest neighbor. This explains not just the striking imagery ("blizzard of lies") but also the moral inflection of the terms used to describe those who "peddle" Putin's untruths ("shame," "dignity," "self-respect") and the distribution of responsibility to numerous enablers of the Kremlin's distorted war narratives. This development reflects the shock suffered by the international community on learning of the vengeful violence with which the invasion was enacted. It is also significant in its expansion of the scope of the concept of disinformation. Not only does it now acquire a moral valence as core to its meaning; it also extends that meaning to the point of convergence with outright lies, on the one hand, and censorship and propaganda, on the other. As the title and subtitle of a *Politico* article indicates (Scott 2022), "disinformation" and "propaganda" have, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, tended to be used interchangeably. This is the context of our own preference for "state propaganda" as an umbrella term that can include, without being reducible to, disinformation.

The same conflations characterized the wide-ranging bans imposed on RT and Sputnik —the frontline warriors in Putin's incursion across the boundaries of the liberal order. RT's coverage of the invasion at times deviated from that of its domestic sister channels, aware that its audiences were exposed to accounts different from those of Channel 1 and Rossiya and even departing from key Kremlin narratives; the term "invasion," taboo in Russia, occurred regularly, if not liberally, in RT International's output. We might wonder, then, whether the distancing quotation marks RT placed around the more commonly used phrase "special military operation" amounts to propaganda, disinformation, or legitimate, if tendentious, editorial practice. Questions likewise arise regarding the inclusion among RT International's op-eds of an essay criticizing Russia's war as an imperialist act (Kortunov 2022), and to an invitation received (and declined) by one of the authors of this book to appear on a flagship RT UK show at the start of the war with assurances that "criticism of

Putin is welcome." Apart from the opportunism such concessions indicate, the barbarity of RT's sponsors arguably compromises its right to be heard at all, regardless of its tokenistic adherence to certain journalistic standards.

The tenor of the statements accompanying the various bans reflected these imperatives. In commenting on the European Union (EU) and its decision, its vice commissioner on standards acknowledged the unorthodox nature of the move: "Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures.… We all stand for freedom of speech, but it cannot be abused to spread war propaganda. The Kremlin has weaponised information" (quoted in Killeen 2022).

The spontaneity with which the restrictions were issued is explained by the heightened emotional context, but this created imprecision over their implementation, with member states "left to determine the penalties they will impose for their violation and enforce them moving forward" (quoted in Killeen 2022). The threshold for their removal likewise lacked clarity; the EU determined merely that they would "remain until the end of aggression towards Ukraine and until Russia and its media cease to conduct propaganda against the EU" (quoted in Killeen 2022). This was far more than action targeting specific breaches of standards. But for anyone convinced that the war was an offense against moral truth and aware that RT was funded by its initiators, such hair-splitting distinctions look superfluous.

Ofcom's revocation of RT's broadcasting license was more consistent with its policy framework (it referenced the subordination of the licensee, TV-Novosti, to Russia's new law prohibiting references to "war," claiming that it therefore ceased to be a "fit and proper" license holder). Nonetheless, the reasoning was sometimes tortuous, with Ofcom acknowledging that it would be "inappropriate always to place decisive weight" on the fact that "states sometimes commit … acts which are contrary to [its] values" and resorting to assumption and the lexicon of exception to justify its decision:

> We consider that expedition was required due to the high public interest in the case and the exceptional circumstances.… No other Ofcom broadcast licensee is financially dependent on a state whose head of state … has been personally sanctioned by the UK for launching a war of aggression against a neighbouring state.… It is difficult to see how any news provider based in Russia could … remain funded if it failed to convey the narrative that the Russian Federation seeks to impose on its own people and the rest of the world.[2]

The propaganda with which Russia's state broadcasters sought to justify the war was thus taken as a direct affront to the broader liberal values that Ukraine was increasingly rapidly assumed to represent. From a Freedom House 2021 ranking of "partially free," Ukraine was rapidly envisioning itself in its resistance to Russian aggression as "the leader of the free world and the leader of our region" (quoted in Sabbagh and Harding 2022).[3] Yet there is arguably an illiberal dimension to the hastily implemented exclusions of Russian broadcasters from the liberal democratic space of free speech. The blatant immorality motivating the Russian state brutalization of Ukraine had created a false impression of clarity regarding what is a far broader set of dilemmas about state actors, information, and liberal values.

"The Devil Is God's Ape"

A common trope applied to what is portrayed as Russia's domestic disinformation blitz is that of a "parallel universe" or "alternate reality" (Echols 2022; Nagorski and Kirillova 2022). The sense is that Russians were given an account of events completely different from (yet parallel to) the truthful, fact-based version familiar to us from respected Western news outlets. There is much to justify these characterizations. From the refusal to acknowledge Russia's targeting of civilian buildings to absurd claims that the Ukrainian government was dominated by Nazis, state broadcasters promoted a narrative bearing little relation to truth.

Yet tropes of parallel realities fail to capture the close attention Russian journalists were, perforce, paying to their adversaries' claims; in a digitally networked world, restrictions on access to independent news sources cannot stem the seepage of inconvenient information into Russian media space. Kremlin propagandists have long known that an effective means of rebuffing such information is neither to deny nor replace it but to invert it. As the war progressed, Russian viewers were subjected less to an entirely different war from that experienced by their European counterparts than the same war in mirror image. Russian news reports featured the carefully reassembled litany of disaster footage familiar to Western audiences: images of bombed-out buildings, weeping women traumatized by loss, disoriented children huddled in shelters, distraught refugees, and intrepid reporters ducking for cover under enemy bombardment. In the accompanying verbal commentary, the values are reversed: instead of Ukrainians under assault by Russia's savage invaders, viewers of the Kremlin's account of events are, according to the counternarrative, witnessing Ukrainian Nazi battalions tormenting long-suffering Russian speakers while fraternal Russian troops, duty-bound to liberate them, bravely resist. Lines familiar from UK news reports detailing the "loss of morale" among Russian troops were parroted, word for word, in Channel 1 coverage of the ostensible confessions of Ukrainian soldiers captured in Mariupol (Iusupov 2022).

The global spread of Ukraine war iconography rendered it easier to mimic and revalorize, step-by-step. Its dynamism presented no hurdle; as the conflict progressed and European public discourse once again featured references to war crimes, torture, and genocide, it was matched in kind by Russia's indefatigable talk show hosts, who presented their own copiously "evidenced" stories of (Ukrainian) crimes against (Russian-speaking) humanity. A new addition to the familiar pantheon of Kremlin propagandists came in the form of the daily *Anti-Fake* show, dedicated to surgical deconstructions of Western videos supposedly faked to incriminate Russia. Here, Kremlin-endorsed discourses combining ethnonationalist tropes (references to the Russian people as a linguaculturally defined community irrespective of citizenship) and imperialist ones (i.e., equating the czarist empire and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) with "Russia") are supplemented with the cold technical language of reasoned critical analysis as close-ups, freeze-frames, and action replays are deployed to expose the depths to which Ukrainian/Western provocateurs supposedly sink. The digitally networked world shaping the revelatory discourses of Kremlin propagandists allowed Western analysts to subject those discourses to similarly cold scrutiny, however, revealing *Anti-Fake*'s unmaskers as liars who duly responded with their own fraud accusations. A case in point was the shocking photos of corpses strewn across Bucha, discredited with reference to their apparent age and then revalidated by satellite images, whose own date was first challenged and then reconfirmed

(Higgins 2022).

The recursive logic of such anti-anti-antifake sequences recalls Martin Luther's reference to the devil as God's ape. The experience of watching Russian television propaganda is akin to that of a human being looking into a mirror and seeing a demonic grinning ape staring back, copying every gesture. Luther's trope captures the momentary disorientation the person gazing at the mirror feels while wondering if she or he is throwing facial grimaces that the humanlike ape then replicates in malign form or whether the reverse is the case, and the ape is the initiator and the human the mere imitator. Many fantastic works dealing in identity crisis (including Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Double*) are structured around this conceit, whose moral implications Dostoevsky appreciated (the devil in his *Brothers Karamazov* was no fiery, trident-wielding demon but a banal provincial gentleman in checkered trousers, the mocking parody of a human being).

At this point, reciprocal censoring reenters the frame. During the blitz of mutual restrictions that followed Russia's invasion, some warned of the risks that summary bans on RT and Sputnik posed for Western journalists operating in Moscow; sure enough, the Kremlin used Western restrictions as cover for actions it was planning anyway (Willems 2022). The propaganda benefits accruing to the Kremlin for being able to present itself as (reluctant) imitator rather than (willing) initiator were only enhanced when outraged Western institutions began to extend their restrictions beyond the confines of state television output. Most striking was the prohibition placed by certain German regions on the infamous *Z* sign, the display of which became punishable by imprisonment. Significantly, the legislation followed pressure from Ukrainian politicians, whose calls for such action carried a moral weight impossible to ignore (Lee 2022). Nor were Western academics immune to free-speech controversies. An eminent, if stubbornly misguided, Chicago professor was not merely urged to *withdraw* his view that Russia had been provoked into war but *change* it (Morson 2022).

The use of the Latin letter *Z* rather than its Cyrillic equivalent as the emblem of the Russian war narrative constitutes a form of apelike mockery, as Western observers stare into the Alice-through-the-looking glass of Kremlin propaganda to see their own script reflected back at them in an evil, swastika-like form that reminds them of their own dark past. The reason why it was in Germany that the sign evoked the strongest reaction requires little explanation. The Kremlin's television cheerleaders were not slow to exploit residual shame at that past, even comparing the "devilish fakery" underlying claims about a Russian airstrike on a maternity clinic in Mariupol to the evil propaganda of Joseph Goebbels (Channel 1 2022). Equally audacious were instructions issued by RT on "how to bypass western censorship of its channels"—phrased to mimic BBC guidance to Russian-speaking audiences following the Kremlin's bans on it (RT 2022b).

But the "exceptional circumstances" mantra overshadowed more mainstream interdictions on support for Russian state barbarism. Here, too, we must explore the complex meaning of the initiator/imitator distinction. If in ejecting the BBC, Russians grin at the West in malign *imitation* of its ban on RT, morally justified as support for Ukrainian defenders of the liberal (b)order, how can Westerners justify their status as *initiators*? The existential crisis precipitated by the mirror paradox is that in staring into the looking glass, gazers lose any footing within reality and with it a sense of the boundaries of selfhood and Otherness: Is the familiar face leering back their own, that of a monstrous Other, or a diabolical double?

Liberalism and Cancel Culture: Antonyms or Synonyms?

The moral weight carried by Ukraine's plea to its democratic allies not to relinquish pressure on Putin and his enablers authenticated extreme positions such as that expressed in a *Time Magazine* article on the complicity of ordinary Russians: "Over five hundred years there have been many attempts to emancipate Russian society. Every attempt collapses with a ruthless autocrat. Why do the Russian people choose unfreedom? The answer is Russian culture.… Russia has enjoyed periods of freedom, but always it returns to this condition of suffering. It's important to understand that it's not Putin who took Russia, but rather Russia which gave itself to Putin" (quoted in Ackerman 2022).

Such attitudes exemplify what scholars now call "cultural racism," in which the physical attributes normally underpinning racist prejudice against a group are substituted (and masked) by supposedly immutable cultural characteristics. This proves particularly effective when applied to white groups lacking recourse to the protective tools of antiracism that link prejudice to skin color (Chua 2017; Taguieff 2001).

Targeted sanctions applied to Kremlin allies and propagandists converged on the territory of cultural assets against which punitive action neatly combines communicative and economic purposes. High-profile cases like the Royal Opera's cancellation of a Bolshoi Ballet residency, the ejection of Russia from the 2022 Eurovision competition, and condemnation of the renowned soprano singer Anna Netrebko for refusing to repudiate Putin are well known (*Guardian* 2022b). Less reported were British university edicts to cease formal ties with Russian academics. This move elicited a trenchant response from Open Democracy, arguing with explicit reference to liberalism that it would alienate Russian scholars opposed to Putin's war (Sokolov 2022), though, to their credit, many UK universities have since striven to include vulnerable Russian academics in initiatives taken to alleviate the suffering caused by Russia's war on Ukraine.

Open Democracy's concerns gained little traction among a Western press corps drunk on the fumes of moral outrage, however.[4] More nuanced assessments of cultural bans came from counterhegemonic broadcasters like Al Jazeera, and Turkey's TRT (2022), which featured a multifaceted analysis of the wisdom of targeting Russian culture as part of the wider anti-Kremlin sanctions regime. Even the BBC struggled at times with achieving the right balance. Its editorial commitments to impartiality (BBC, n.d.) permit the inclusion of "content about any subject, at any point on the spectrum of debate" providing that the coverage can adequately "scrutinise arguments, question consensus and hold power to account." Some of its content, such as a carefully weighted, conclusive deconstruction of Russian claims that Ukrainian forces are Nazi dominated (BBC 2022), served as powerful demonstrations of this "due impartiality." Yet its former Moscow correspondent openly questioned whether Russian denials of war crimes should be reported *even when accompanied by skeptical evaluation of their credibility*, for fear of giving them the oxygen of publicity.[5] Overall, then, the Ukraine war marked a milestone in a trend that has seen the status within the liberal public realm of impartiality values questioned.

Some in the West recognized the disjuncture between liberalism and the measures being taken in its name. John Harris (2022) wrote that "liberal … values—not to mention the delicate stuff of geopolitics and diplomacy—demand nuance and calm," rather than the "bellicosity" with which the Ukraine war was met throughout much of the political

mainstream. After a video of Russian prisoners of war denouncing the invasion went viral among social media users, the human rights organization Amnesty International (AI; 2022) reminded a liberal order affronted by Russian crimes that the rules that bind it—including those protecting prisoners of war from being used in this way—must be adhered to consistently. The moral truth of AI's admonition later received validation when a captured British national fighting for Ukraine was displayed for propaganda purposes on Russian state television (Fielding et al. 2022).

The fault lines that appeared within liberal democracy following the Russian invasion were keenly observed by Vladimir Putin. To the indignation of his adversaries, Putin drew parallels between blanket Western bans on Russian institutions and the cancel culture from which the author J. K. Rowling had supposedly suffered. Rowling responded by observing that critics of cancel culture who slaughter civilians have little credence (Siad, Hodge, and Owoseje 2022). For Putin, cancel culture, woke-ism, the LGBTQ movement—in short, everything belonging under the identity politics umbrella—is the epitome of liberalism, the antithesis to the traditional values of which Putin's Russia claims to be the figurehead, and, according to its 2021 National Security Strategy, a security threat. In fact, cancel culture is hotly contested within democracies, with universalist liberals rejecting it in favor of the primacy of free speech, conservatives critiquing its collectivist foundations and "sexually deviant" antifamily advocacy, democratic socialists and ecologists dismissing it as a distraction from the politics of class/the environment, and new-generation liberals endorsing its emphasis on individuals' right to protect their identity positions.

For Putin's cheerleaders, the invocation of cancel culture consolidates Russia's connections to the far-right forces within liberal democracy to which it had long made overtures. As emphasized by RT France (which, like RT Russian, remained accessible in the United Kingdom well after the restrictions imposed on RT International, confirming the inconsistency of the bans), however, it also facilitates the drawing of parallels between the actions of contemporary democracies against Russian cultural institutions and Nazi attacks on "undesirable European art" (RT France 2022). The cancel culture mantra inserts a wedge into the politics of right and left, producing disconcerting contradictions on both sides. Boris Johnson, at that time the leader of a party whose alleged links to Russian money have attracted suspicion, echoed Kremlin Russophobia accusations against opponents questioning his role in the awarding of a peerage to Evgenii Lebedev, the son of a former KGB (Soviet State Security Committee) spy (Bennett 2022), before being named by the Kremlin as "the most anti-Russian politician" (Williams 2022). Balancing this anomaly, Britain's liberal-progressive *Guardian* published an op-ed justifying Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra's decision to cut from a concert Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* owing to the composer's "great Russian" sentiments (Bujic 2022).

Russia's war on Ukraine opened chasms in every wing of democratic politics. On the far left, it pitted traditional opponents of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) "warmongering" against the romantic, grassroots revolutionism of leftist populists like Paul Mason, who assailed his erstwhile Corbynite allies for enabling Russian barbarism by targeting NATO and called for working-class solidarity with Ukrainian trades unionists united against Russia's invasion.[6] Right-wing commentators used Putin's weaponization of cancel culture to redraw the line between themselves and a broadly conceived left eviscerated by post–Cold War "wokery":

> With liberty now so openly pitted against authoritarianism … squabbles over

> statues and gender pronouns seem grotesquely self-indulgent.… This should have been the moment when we rallied around the values that make Western civilisation unique: freedom, individualism, sovereignty, democracy, and the rule of law. Instead, the West remains tormented by … self-loathing. (Jacobs 2022)

Responding from the moderate left, Rowan Moore (2022) highlighted the connection between grammar and semantics:

> Beware the journalistic use of the word "we." It's a slippery pronoun that can slide from meaning "we, the whole of humanity" to "we, the author and some like-minded friends" to "we, an ill-defined mass who uphold an imaginary consensus that the author wishes bravely to oppose."

Addressing Jacobs's allegations head on, he asks whether

> what she calls "squabbles" might also be called free speech and the wish to defend minorities? Or that the cold war coincided with a much-squabbled-over expansion of rights for those same minorities, which right-wing commentators of the time … would assuredly have called "woke"? Or that tirades like hers oddly echo those of Putin.… against … western "cancel culture"? (Moore 2022)

The paradox Moore identifies is that the act of hailing all-embracing unity against a common enemy embodied in the articulation of the pronoun "we" draws new lines of mutual antagonism *within* that "we." Alternatively put, "cancel culture" is both the synonym and the antonym of liberal democracy.

"The Enemy Within"

If a rift appears within a unifying "we" at its moment of utterance, its cause must be eliminated to salvage this utterance's performative effect. Here, too, language provides a useful, if unsettling, guide. When Putin's failure to achieve his initial aims emerged, he began equating Ukraine's Western backers with the "fifth columnists" and "traitors" within Russia, and the extent of his aggressive intentions toward both Ukraine and internal dissenters became apparent. In the context of Putin's own misappropriation of Nazi parallels in Ukraine, oppositional Telegram channels interpreted his chilling rhetoric as signaling the launch of a Fourth Reich. Furthermore, in comparing his enemies to an insect that has accidentally flown into one's mouth and must be "spat out," he referred specifically to the need to "cleanse" Russia (Putin 2022b), thus recalling Stalin's "purges."

The revulsion created by Putin's words and actions (for once in sync) compelled sundry liberal commentators to rally opponents to the war under the banner of freedom, legality, and democracy. Bona fide democrats were prominent in coordinating this response. The UK intellectual Timothy Garton Ash took as his cue the victory of the populist Putin sympathizer Viktor Orban in the Hungarian elections of 2022, writing of a "darkness enveloping Europe" and suggesting that Russia's invasion represented a threat to democracy that had penetrated beyond its boundary zone and into its European heartlands (Garton Ash 2022). In his prescription for this problem, he insisted that "Europe should now get

tough on both the Russian enemy without and the Hungarian enemy within" (Garton Ash 2022). The notion of "enemies within" colluding with an "enemy without" is uncomfortably close to Putin's own rhetoric.

Garton Ash's phrasing highlights a more troublesome discursive parallel. Commentators have linked Russia's actions in Ukraine with its domestic challenges; one of the common motivations for those actions is that of Ukraine as the site of the kind of post-Soviet color revolution Russia's political elite is desperate to avoid (the invasion was, tellingly, preceded by the jailing of Putin's most dangerous opponent, Navalny). Nor is it difficult to comprehend why the Kremlin associates both Navalny and Ukraine's Maidan protestors with a "Russophobic" and acquisitive West. In realizing his ingrained contempt for Ukraine by portraying it as the puppet of a manipulative West, Putin projects his deep fear of an alien force that threatens his domestic hegemony. This phenomenon has acquired new vitality in the Ukraine war context. Spitting out an insect requires a repulsive intruder to be propelled back to its point of origin.

Ukraine's potency in the imaginations of Russia and its Western foes resides in its very ambiguity, however. For Russia it serves both as the uncouth relative in need of disciplinary restraint administered by an imperial elder brother—or as prewar state television sometimes had it, the "stinking farm" (*voniuchii khutor*) at the peripheries of an urbane, civilized heartland (Hutchings 2022, 87)—and as the vacant space of a nonnation and zombified nonpeople under the control of a ruthless Western Other. For this reason, Kremlin propagandists first oscillated between depictions of a hapless Ukrainian people held hostage by Nazi-inspired NATO stooges and of an entire pseudo-Russian population in urgent need not of denazification, as Putin originally proposed, but "de-Ukrainization" before eliding the accounts by claiming that since Ukrainian nationhood is fabricated, only ultranationalists promote it (Denisova 2022; Sergeitsev 2022).

Reasons for antipathy to Putin's imperialistic reasoning abound. The way in which that antipathy is expressed is significant, however. Garton Ash's diatribe constructs Russia as exterior to Europe, Hungary as belonging firmly within it, and Ukraine as its embattled front line. Garton Ash uses "Europe" as shorthand for the EU, of which Hungary is a (recalcitrant) full member and Ukraine an aspiring candidate member. Geographical boundaries are cultural and political constructs (Lewis and Wigen 1997), but it is now generally accepted that the Urals constitute Europe's eastern border. This means that Europe embraces much of Russia that, in the Western imaginary, constitutes our own malodorous periphery ripe for disowning, or "de-Putinization," a term preceding postinvasion Russian notions of de-Ukrainization but gaining traction from that invasion (Motyl 2021; Brennan 2022).

While morally justified, the intensity of European objections to Kremlin breaches of civilized norms partly reflects Russia's liminal status as both "of the self" and "of the Other." This facilitates a projection onto that Other of the most shameful aspects of selfhood—an option less obviously available for non-European flouters of those norms like China. A vivid illustration of this phenomenon came in the form of reactions to sanctions imposed against London's Russian oligarchs. As Aditya Chakrabortty argues, advocates of their expulsion are expectorating the phlegm of a disease they themselves facilitated: "The US and the UK funded, staffed, and applauded the programmes meant to 'transform' the country's economy, but which … handed over the assets of an industrialised and commodity-rich country to a few dozen men with close connections to the Kremlin"

(Chakrabortty 2022).

In a variant of Chakrobortty's argument, US senator Bernie Sanders drew parallels between Russian and US oligarchy (Adams 2023). Chakrobortty's sardonic reminders of Western amnesia about its pseudo-imperial adventures of the recent past likewise expose how convenient it proves for Westerners to project those disasters onto Russia:

> Western values. The free world. The liberal order. Perhaps … you thought such puffed-chest language … had been buried under the rubble of Iraq.… Ursula von der Leyen claims Vladimir Putin has "brought war back to Europe," as if Yugoslavia and Kosovo had been hallucinations. Condoleezza Rice pops up on Fox to be told by the anchor: "When you invade a sovereign nation, that is a war crime." With a solemn nod, the former secretary of state to George Bush replies: "It is certainly against every principle of international law and international order." She maintains a commendably straight face. (Chakrobortty 2022)

In a Freudian slip, former US president George W. Bush mistakenly referred in May 2022 to the "wholly unjustified invasion of Iraq" in a speech condemning Russia's assault on Ukraine (*Guardian* 2022a). In its early reporting of events in Iraq, the BBC avoided the term "invasion"—the word that it deployed immediately following Russia's attack on Ukraine. Once the United Kingdom's inquiry on the decision to enter the conflict reported its findings in 2016, however, it routinely referenced Blair's "invasion of Iraq" (BBC 2016). The much-condemned Kremlin circumlocution "special military operation" was clearly conceived with Iraq in mind, with a pro-Kremlin interviewee on the UK news comparing Russia's actions to those of the United States, on whose account the euphemistic description of civilian casualties as "collateral damage" was coined (Channel 4 News UK, February 28, 2022). This prompted an angry exchange about whether the sins of one "great power" justified another's. The presenter's exasperation was partly a response to seeing a mocking, apish mimicry of Western actions played back on the mirrorlike screen of the remote video link.

The disgorging onto Russia's present of the disgust that a jaded liberal democracy feels for its own past is balanced by its willing ingestion of the renovating power of Ukrainian national resilience. In contrast to Russia's violent calls for the "de-Ukrainization" of Ukraine (Sergeitsev 2022), progressive European citizens–usually averse to flag-waving patriotism—now proudly vaunted their yellow-and-blue Ukrainian T-shirt emblems and Facebook profiles. In the United Kingdom, the opportunity offered by war in Ukraine to revalidate European liberal values and celebrate true British generosity toward refugees appears as the bright light of a new dawn dispelling the dark clouds of Brexit and Trump. The journalist Peter Pomerantsev insisted that Ukraine is "our past and our future" (Pomerantsev 2022), an embodiment of democracy's own symbolic destiny: "Once again, Ukraine is making us rethink our values, our laws, our policies.… Ukraine is the crucible of so much horror in history—it has also produced the ideas, stories, and policies that define good from bad for us all. It will again. It must again. Ukraine is the place where the invisible is surfaced, where the suppressed will be remembered, where horror is made into meaning. For their freedom and ours."

The paradox underlying Ukraine's revitalizing effects on the Western body politic is that it fulfills this function precisely because of its emergence from regressive ethnonationalist trends dating to a turn-of-the-twentieth-century pan-European trend. Attributable to its

very *incompleteness*, the *dynamism* of that process has unsurprisingly provoked lively scholarly interest, with the broad consensus being that Ukraine is increasingly embracing "civic loyalty" over "ethnic origin and cultural proximity" in their rearticulation of national identity (Kulyk 2018; Onuch 2022). Yet the principles requiring the rebuttal of grotesque Russian falsehoods about contemporary Ukrainian Nazism are incompatible with blanket refusals to acknowledge that, like that of other European countries, Ukraine's past is complex. Indeed, very few liberal democracies have shed all vestiges of ethnonationalism that blotted their own pasts; one of the fractures within the Western mainstream media (MSM) prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine was between those advocating for a progressive Europe to openly welcome Ukrainian refugees and those who cautioned that such passion contrasts awkwardly with wider societal preferences for minimizing inward flows of migrants perceived as less civilized than Ukrainians (Bayoumi 2022).[7] This contradiction is the corollary to parallel tensions troubling Ukrainian democracy. As a commentator in the respected *Foreign Policy* journal noted, the flowering of progressive notions of Ukrainian nationhood partly reflects the expunging of inconvenient episodes about the past by zealous historians like the scholar Volodymyr Viatrovych, the controversial first director of Ukraine's Institute of National Memory, mentioned here: "Advocating a nationalist, revisionist history that glorifies the country's move to independence—and purges bloody and opportunistic chapters—Viatrovych has attempted to redraft the country's modern history to whitewash Ukrainian nationalist groups' involvement in the Holocaust and mass ethnic cleansing of Poles during World War II. And right now, he's winning" (Cohen 2016).[8]

Dating to 2016, the *Foreign Policy* article could have been neither written nor published in 2022—a discomforting reality that reinforces the validity of the case it makes. More common in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine are admiring commentaries on the shifting of democratic Europe's center of gravity eastward, to the likes of Poland, whose own darker, illiberal features are conveniently occluded (Keiger 2023).

The Incestuous Geopolitics of Anti-imperialism

The war has a wider geopolitical context. Far from shattering Western unity, Russia's assault on Ukrainian sovereignty appeared to engineer the reverse, unifying virtually the entire democratic world against its actions and, notwithstanding various subterrestrial fractures, renewing public faith in democratic values. Assertions of global solidarity against an isolated Russia are questionable, however. They make the familiar error of presenting Western consensus as a proxy for that of the whole globe. Although the United Nations resolution condemning Russia's invasion attracted overwhelming support, the combined populations of those forty countries voting against or abstaining (including India, China, Brazil, Iran, Iraq, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe) exceed that of its supporters (Rutland 2022a). Nor are all the abstaining nations autocracies; they include India, ruled by a democratically elected leader with ethnonationalist proclivities and a tarnished human rights record. Later doubts about the war expressed by allies of Russia, such as India, China, and Turkey, and prompted by Putin's increasingly bellicose pronouncements did not undo their tacit support for his actions.

Hairline cracks within the liberal order are matched by external postures toward it ranging from mild disdain to anti-imperial diatribe. Russia's international media tools, including RT, have striven to widen the internal fractures and champion the external assaults, and RT has deployed incipient narratives capable of melding the two strategies by repurposing the Russophobia charge against Western establishments. In mending some of the internal tensions, the Ukraine war opened new fissures, altering the tone of anti-Western sentiment in the developing world but hardly suppressing it. It has curtailed RT's presence in Western media space without terminating its activities beyond it. Moreover, in a digital world, notwithstanding China's Great Firewall and Russia's Sovereign Internet projects, media space transcends geopolitical borders.

RT journalists portray the Ukraine war as a symptom of the "end of the liberal order" (RT Russian 2022a), an argument not refuted by the still significant presence RT maintains in non-Western media environments and that enables it to remain competitive in these regions with CNN, France 24, and the BBC World Service. RT Spanish broadcasts remain available throughout Latin America (Bohmer 2022), as is the case for RT Arabic in the Middle East. The impact of this presence is difficult to discern, however, since RT posts and global social media follower numbers have been broadly maintained, and in some cases bolstered, by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while engagement figures have tended to decline, especially as the conflict wears on.[9]

Broader concerns target the failure of social media platforms, especially Facebook, to implement bans on Russian state media output, particularly in languages other than English (Paul 2022), and the "easy pivot" that online bots, conspiracists, and trolls have made from COVID-19 to the Ukraine war (Schreiber 2022). It is not necessary to look beyond Europe for evidence of RT's and Sputnik's relative resilience. Sputnik Radio remains popular in Serbia, where support for Russia's actions in Ukraine is high and which is the target of the new RT Balkan web service (Velebit 2022). Research on Chinese state-controlled Mandarin-language media output indicates a coordinated effort to promote pro-Russia perspectives on the Ukraine war, including the controversial angle given to Victory Day celebrations in Moscow on May 9, 2022 (Doublethink Lab 2022). It also highlights the role played by Chinese-backed English-language websites like Global Times in mediating between Russian-language and Mandarin war disinformation (Doublethink Lab 2022). A March 2022 *Guardian* article surveying media coverage of the war across the world lists outlets from Venezuela, Mexico, China, Cuba, South Africa, Syria, North Korea, Nigeria, and Brazil as adopting anti-Western angles on the Ukraine conflict (Phillips et al. 2022).

Anti-imperialist sentiment stalks former imperial centers as well as spaces beyond them. Allegations of racist hypocrisy leveled by European left-leaning journalists against Western establishments silent about Ukraine's mistreatment of African students represent just one variant (Dovi 2022). Closely related, but with less overtly anti-imperialist tones, are calls for better treatment of all migrants from progressives invoking the universalist value of "our common humanity" (Sylvester 2022; Younge 2022).

Yet the populist, conspiratorial right also saw in the pro-Ukrainian consensus the corroboration of their deep state and New World Order narratives, each of which posits a form of covert empire building. Network Contagion Research Centre (NCRI 2022) research shows that New World Order conspiracy theories and anti-NATO rhetoric surged by nearly 20 percent on Twitter after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russian proxy websites promoting Kremlin disinformation under Anglophone camouflage meld similar

conspiracy theories, with domestic narratives portraying Ukraine as an Anglo-Saxon–controlled "Anti-Russia." One such article celebrated Russia's "reunification" with its Ukrainian "brothers" and the war as the beginning of a "New World Order," a term whose standard meaning it purposefully inverts, illustrating the interbreeding between Russian imperialist rhetoric and conspiratorial far-right antihegemonism (Akopov 2022b). Russia's simultaneous status as the center of a glorious empire and the victim of Anglo-Saxon colonialism provides the connection point.

Russia's invasion bolstered existing ties linking Kremlin propaganda to alt-right populist ideologies. Stone (2022) refers to "a feedback loop between the Kremlin and parts of the American right [that] has been palpable since the war's start in February." The Fox News talk show host Tucker Carlson labeled Ukraine "an obedient puppet of the Biden state department," describing Russia's invasion as a mere "border dispute" (Reich 2022). Carlson received praise from Sergei Lavrov and from Russian state media (Walters 2022).

Networked Conspiracies

A prominent Ukraine war conspiracy theory linked to Russia is the unevidenced story telling of secret US bioweapons factories in Ukraine. This gained a following among QAnon supporters and online COVID-19 skeptics and was seen by some as a rare Russian win in the information war over Ukraine (Chappell and Yousef 2022). The networks in question stretch beyond the far right. Twitter has seen infighting between the progressive and the far left over the legitimacy of boosting the biolab conspiracy.[10] But how extensive are connections linking Russia's Ukraine narratives to marginal and mainstream actors in the United States and elsewhere; what are the online networks that constitute them; and what role do RT and Sputnik play in this process? To answer these questions, we carried out a hyperlink microstudy of stories within an online media network of which the two Russian outlets are part.

Focusing on the biolab conspiracy and using as key words "Pathogens Ukraine," "Biolabs Ukraine," and "Deep State Ukraine," we searched the state-aligned outlets most commonly cited in the largest database of Russian disinformation (East StratCom's EUvsDisinfo). The outlets are of a different nature and provenance. Some are overtly state funded (RT and Sputnik), while other less prominent Russian outlets have varyingly concealed Kremlin connections, including News Front, which disguises itself as an Anglophone enterprise. The full list is as follows:

1. RT
2. Sputnik News
3. News Front
4. Geopolitica
5. Katehon
6. Tsargrad.tv

We then searched two categories of outlet that, apart from Global Times (a Chinese state-backed initiative), have genuine Anglophone provenance but were identified in previous research as having either collaborated with Russian state media or as having

occasionally implicitly embraced Russian state-endorsed narratives (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2018). These were alternative anti-MSM of the right and, in the Grayzone's case, the left (1–7 below) and conservative right MSM outlets (8–10):

1. Breitbart News Network
2. Newsmax
3. Rebel News
4. Infowars
5. Grayzone
6. *Epoch Times*
7. *Daily Sceptic*
8. Global Times
9. Fox News
10. *Daily Mail*

The five most relevant results were selected following careful reading of the articles listed in the search. Where sources yielded fewer than five results, we included them all, provided the articles cited the key words. For RT we included its English, Spanish, and German sites. Overall the search yielded 106 links to Ukrainian biolabs and the deep state.

A quantitative analysis was performed with the hyperlink software Hyphe. We performed a one-click and a two-click crawl using as our starting pages the 106 links we had identified and a three-click deep crawl based on the mother pages of those 106 links (i.e., the entire sites RT.com, Sputniknews.com, etc.). We added a three-click deep crawl of the two hundred sites identified by the *Is It Propaganda or Not?* initiative as echoing Russian propaganda.[11] Finally, given his influence on the alt-right, we included Tucker Carlson's Twitter account as an "in" link (his is the only Twitter account included in our mappings).

The maps we generated helped visualize the connections between the different websites. They provided only limited information about specific Western media reports that link to Russian sources, however. We therefore conducted a qualitative analysis of selected pages (from Infowars, the Grayzone, the *Daily Mail*, the *Epoch Times*, Breitbart News Network, and Newsmax). Searching each page manually while reading the text and through the page's source code allowed us to trace links depicted on the network map back to their sources.

Quantitative Analysis

A one-click deep crawl based on 106 links created a corpus of 360 web entities. In relation to biolabs and the deep state, all media cited only stories from their own site, with no instances of cross-linkage. A subsequent two-click deep crawl used as its starting pages the stories selected from RT, Sputnik News, Breitbart News Network, Fox News, and Rebel News (forty-two starting pages, 421 web entities). Figure 9.1 shows two instances of cross-linkage between Sputniknews.com, Foxnews.com, and Breitbart.com, indicating specifically that Breitbart's biolabs article links to a Sputnik News article and that Sputnik News cites a Fox News article (Carlson 2022; Martel 2022; Tsukanov 2022).

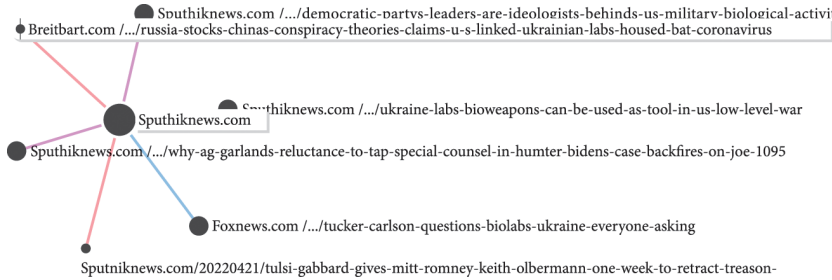

FIGURE 9.1. Two-click deep search of forty-two starting pages and 421 web entities

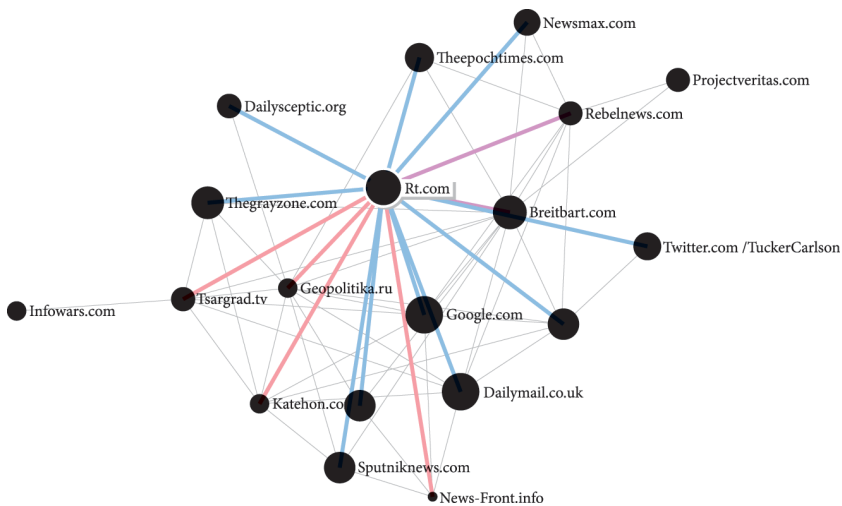

FIGURE 9.2. RT's links to selected Russian and conservative Western media

We expanded our search from the biolabs/deep state stories to include the mother pages in their entirety. A three-click deep search of these original 106 sites compacted into 20 web entities (the mother sites) created a corpus of 37,138 web entities. Figures 9.2–9.4 visualize the results.

Figure 9.2 shows RT's links to other media. The *red links* are "in" pages that cite RT but are not cited by it. These are Katehon.com, Geopolitica.ru, Tsargrad.tv, and News-Front.info. The *blue links* are "out" links cited by RT that do not cite it. These are Newsmax.com, Theepochtimes.com, Dailymail.co.uk, Thegrayzone.com, Globaltimes.cn, Sputniknews.com, Dailysceptic.org, and Tucker Carlson's Twitter account. The *purple lines* are links that mutually cite one another (Breitbart.com and Rebelnews.com). Thus, Breitbart News Network and Rebel News are both cited by RT and cite it in return.

Sputniknews.com (figure 9.3), our second Russian node, is cited by almost all Russian media (RT.com, Geopolitica.ru, Katehon.com, News-Front.info) and Breitbart News Network. It does not cite any of the media listed here, however. As earlier studies show,

Sputnik is opaque about its sources, often cross-referencing only its own material to boost its Google rankings (Birge 2022).

The fourth crawl was broader still, including two hundred sites identified by *Is it Propaganda or Not?* A three-click deep Hyphe search of the mother sites generated a 920,000-page corpus. The associated maps provide a more complete picture of linkages between RT and Western media. Figure 9.4 reveals that RT presents no "out" links but that Infowars.com cites its articles.

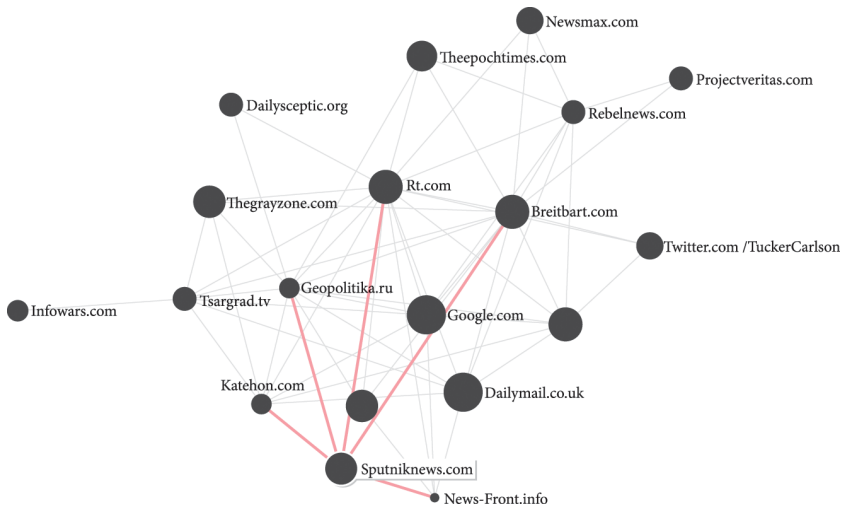

FIGURE 9.3. Sputnik News links to selected Russian and conservative Western media

Identifying linkages between and among Russian and Western conservative (and in the Grayzone's case, leftist) media requires manual scrutiny of the pages and their source codes, so we searched separately for links to Russian sources in a sample going beyond both the biolabs stories and the media included in the quantitative study. This analysis revealed that two Grayzone articles included direct links to RT and Sputnik and one an indirect link to Sputnik via a story in an Indian outlet (Blumenthal 2017; Maté 2020; DeCamp 2022; WION 2022). We also found an Infowars (2022) article based on an interview previously published by RT (2022a), as well as references in other US far-right outlets—Breitbart News Network, Newsmax, and the *Epoch Times* (Ly 2022; Mack 2022; Martel 2022)—to Russian sources including, respectively, Sputnik and the Russian Ministry of Defence (Mikhaylov 2022; Tsukanov 2022). Even the *Daily Mail* online reproduced a Russian Ministry of Defence video (*Daily Mail.com* 2022). Thus, both quantitative and qualitative analyses show that certain far-right and far-left Western media link regularly to Russian outlets considered disinformation nodes.

Our maps ascertained that most minor Russian media rely heavily on domestic sources, while RT and Sputnik News link frequently to Western media sites. The only exception is Geopolitica, which is more open to Western media reports. The sites under consideration

treat similar issues and extract information from the same sources. As our one-click and two-click deep search suggested, however, news sites often promote their own articles for search engine optimization purposes (an indication of the tensions between liberalism's free market principles and its political commitment to objectivity and plurality).

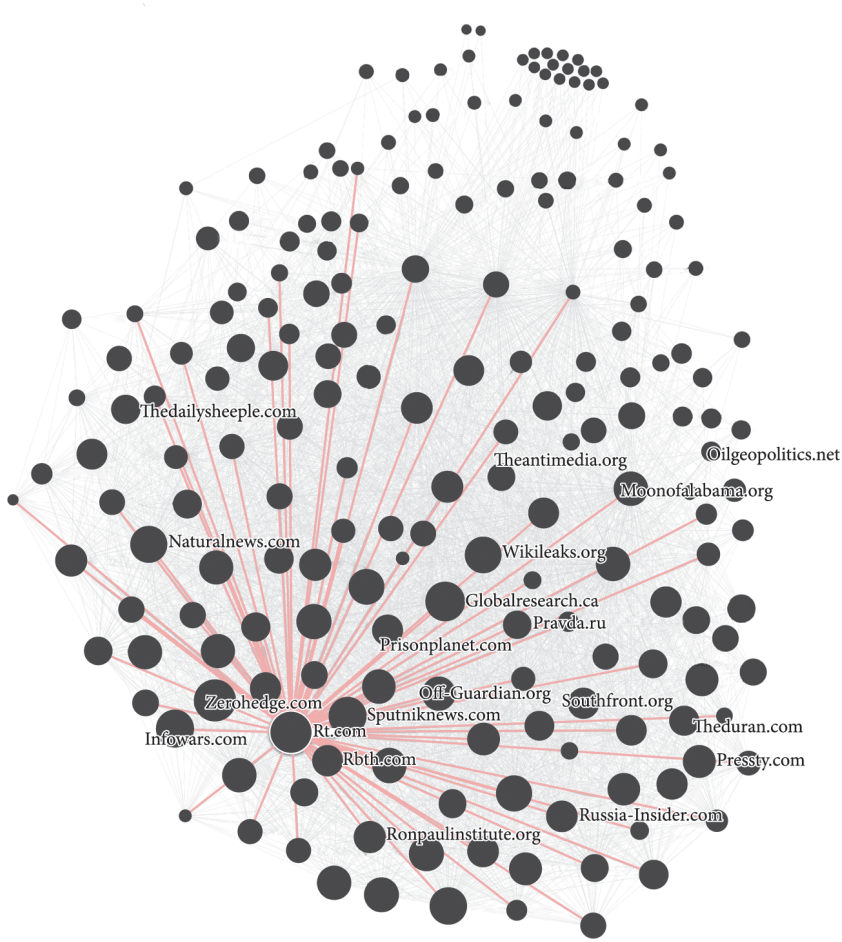

FIGURE 9.4. RT's position in a broader network map (two hundred sites)

Overall, our analysis recorroborates our challenge to a common narrative about Russia's invasion of Ukraine: that the destruction it wreaked resulted in universal opprobrium for Russia and the unification of the entire democratic world against its brutal regime. The opprobrium was widespread but hardly universal, its unifying effect far from complete. The dense networking of digital media space has facilitated cross-fertilization between the two sources of pressure on this received wisdom: the (albeit inconsistent) strains of anti-

imperialist disdain directed toward an outraged democratic West from without and the surge of conspiratorial suspicion from within that populist opponents of a New World Order directed toward condemnation of the invasion. Protean as ever, and despite the constraints it now confronts, RT already shows signs of reconstituting its role as the primary agent of cross-pollination.

Ukraine's fluidity as signifier enables it to generate a range of meanings that are key to the war's wider consequences. Justifiable moral outrage against Russia's actions hid tensions and fault lines within liberal democracy. The Russian propaganda machine's derisive mirroring of Western accounts (a function of global connectivity) triggered the projection onto Russia of shameful features of the West's imperial past; Putin's barbarism owes more than a little of its abhorrent Otherness to the repressed history of the self that it disinters.

In a related paradox, the unity conferred on the liberal order by Ukraine's status as both its embattled borderline and the bearer of its core values also precipitates the fracturing of that order into moral universalist, conservative anticollectivist, progressive-democratic, neoliberal, and identity-focused variants. Meanwhile, Ukraine's role as a dynamic revalidator of liberalism also makes it the conduit for certain illiberal contaminants. These in turn have initiated the reconfiguration of ideological battle lines within liberal democracy, including the consolidation of populist forces whose antagonism toward the deep state aligns them with non-Western opponents of democracy other than Russia. Truth, it seems, can be spelled with a *Z* from within as well as from outside the liberal border. No actor is more intuitively aware of this alignment's disruptive potential than RT, whose suppression across Western media space is extending its ambitions beyond that space's margins.

None of the contradictions should obscure the opportunity for renewal that the antediluvian imperial logic Russia used to justify invading Ukraine represents for democracy. Much depends on what happens within Russia. Occasional departures from the strictly curated Kremlin narrative facilitated by the spontaneity of the live talk-show format offer no guarantee that the political elite surrounding Putin is about to cede power or that, should it do so, it will be replaced by a more enlightened alternative about to burst forth, Euromaidan-like, from below. This uncertainty makes it incumbent on defenders of what is routinely, yet problematically, termed the "liberal democratic model" to carefully weigh their actions and words; to place them in a wider, longer-term context; to evade the traps into which proponents of binary and teleological logics are prone to fall; and to beware of loose, reductive definitions of historically and discursively complex concepts like disinformation.

Putin's demonization of liberalism reflects a relational, identity-driven process to be approached with extreme caution, rather than reinforced through the automatic impugning of anyone who draws attention to antithetical Western versions of it. As an ebullient contribution to the *Journal of Democracy* illustrates, Russia's aggression against its closest neighbor has indeed breathed new confidence into a project beset by self-doubt and internal strife. Optimistically titled "The Rebirth of the Liberal World Order?," the article celebrates Ukraine's role in strengthening the sacrosanct status of Western democracy's borders: "The invasion has drawn sharp battle lines between authoritarian Russia on one side and a community of democratic states supporting Ukraine's imperiled democracy on the other" (Way 2022). Self-doubt, however, is not necessarily a flaw nor inner discord invariably a mark of weakness. It is a better appreciation of how these qualities can nourish

as well as taint a liberal project, the very definition of which is contested and contradictory, that will guarantee its long-term future, providing more durable protection against those who seek to destroy it.

CONCLUSION

We began this book with two cautionary tales. We end with a third, which enables us to reflect on our part in the story we tell. Our reflection is no perfunctory comment on researcher positionality but rather the key to our book's wider significance. The story also highlights the intersection between the four key themes within our argument: (1) the performative, self-fulfilling logic of the information war and the paradoxically convergent interests of the states that prosecute it; (2) the inability of such states to fully grasp the complex, unstable assemblages associated with our mediatizing public realm; (3) the participatory populism that thrives at mediatization's intersection with neoliberal logic, which authoritarian state actors like RT internalize rather than harness from without; (4) the resulting emergence of counterintuitive affinities between RT and its fiercest opponents, which have ramifications for the liberal order's commitment to the careful scrutiny of factual realities.

We recognize that the liberal order faces a threat from a new, resourceful, yet far from omnipotent breed of authoritarian regime whose urge to reassert itself during geopolitical realignment was encapsulated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We contend, however, that the challenge will not be met if liberalism fails to protect its greatest virtue: its capacity for open-ended, self-conscious reflection on its own internal tensions and blind spots. These include the contradiction inherent to the very collocation "liberal democracy" (a contradiction open to exploitation by populists active in Western media space); the fact that liberalism's sustainability relies, like all systems, on a set of relational identity practices as well as on its insistence on universal values; the wider context of processes extending beyond Western geopolitical space in which democratic and nondemocratic states' actions shape one another as part of a dynamic rendered more complex by mediatization; and the deviation from liberal principles under "exceptional circumstances," including vast, multipronged propaganda campaigns launched in support of violent imperial wars.

Ignorance of the implications of such blind spots results in major shortcomings across Western commentary on Russian state communication strategies, which is often driven by Cold War–era binary paradigms. These paradigms struggle to accommodate how accelerated global information flows transect bounded geopolitical media spaces and the nexus of reciprocal processes generated by the symbiosis of new technologies with emergent post–Cold War political and socioeconomic configurations. This traps their proponents in a self-replicating identity dynamic in which each side projects onto the other its own most profound shortcomings. It also occludes the successes of agile actors like RT beyond the domain of the liberal order and their ability even within that order to "work with the grain of the indeterminacy of the online world" and to insinuate themselves into its central cleavages (Hutchings et al. 2015, 650). The ultimate danger, we contend, is that democracy's keenest defenders might abandon its guiding precepts. In illuminating the implications of this contradiction, our final anecdote sketches a pathway to its resolution by reinvoking the liberal order's inherent openness to a truly contingent Otherness—one that transcends the distortions of alterity conceived as mirrored selfhood.

From "Information War" to Twitter Spat

Just as our research was entering its final stages but before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we published a short online blog on a topic only indirectly related to RT, issuing a short Twitter thread announcing its publication and anticipating the normal trickle of retweets, likes, comments, and questions (Hutchings and Tolz 2020). What followed was anything other than expected. Before describing the fallout, we should reveal what provoked it.

On being contacted by a *Daily Mail* journalist for commentary on the reliability of evidence for the Kremlin's COVID-19–related disinformation, we discovered that a substantial proportion of this evidence, drawn from a frequently cited European disinformation-tracking unit, was either misleading or simply false. We did not endorse the thrust of the ensuing article, whose familiar information war frame inadequately reflects Russia's longer-term place within the global communications environment, notwithstanding the propaganda and repression campaign that the Kremlin launched in 2022 to mask its act of imperial violence against democracy's newest recruit. We were gratified, nonetheless, that she checked her sources rather than taking them at face value and accurately, if briefly, represented our misgivings (Boyle 2020). So deep were those misgivings that we felt obliged to pursue them. The issues ranged from a misuse of terminology, through the misassociation of an outrageous view expressed by a single talk-show guest with the host's position, to outright deception (to claim that an article ridiculing COVID-19 conspiracy theories is instead propagating them is beyond careless).

Suspecting these were isolated errors, explicable in the context of the impressive overall volume of investigations conducted by a counterdisinformation unit whose underlying convictions we shared, we examined a random sample of their outputs, only to discover that the problems were endemic. Conceived in the spirit of critical friendship, our blog post presented our concerns, along with positive suggestions regarding improvements to the unit's mode of operation that could be made at minimum cost. Those who align themselves

with truth and accuracy against state disinformation, we assumed, would wish to be guided back to the standards they publicly defend. To do otherwise would only benefit authoritarian actors actively seeking to weaponize Western media misrepresentations of their activities.

A Twitter pile on the following day bolstered the impact of our research to hitherto unseen levels. Despite having stirred the ire of Putin loyalists and Russian nationalists in the past (Hutchings and Tolz 2018), we had never before had similar experiences with supporters of the liberal values that as impartial academics we strive to uphold.[1] These included intimidating messages from NATO (National Atlantic Treaty Organization)-aligned Eastern European trolls as well as censure from representatives of the disinformation unit that had been the subject of our blog, a prominent member of a respected UK think tank, and journalists from "alternative news" outlets with countermainstream missions not dissimilar to RT's.

What upset our detractors was not only our critical advice to Europe's frontline warrior against Russian disinformation but also RT's unsurprising decision to cite our blog as evidence in its own denunciation of the European disinformation unit (Malic 2020). One alternative news outlet subsequently attempted to discredit our previous history as scholars, effectively writing us off as "Useful Idiots" (Hurst 2020). The Russian oppositional outlet the *Insider*, meanwhile, published a denunciation whose hysterically inaccurate subtitle rendered it precisely the "fake news" it accused us of defending: "In Britain a project has been discovered that is defending Russian fakery at the taxpayers' expense" (Bershidskii 2020). No matter that we had previously praised the *Insider* on BBC *Newsnight* for exposing the true identities of the Salisbury poisoners and have featured extensively in Putin-critical outlets such as the BBC, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, and the oppositional Russian outlet Meduza.[2] In the reductive "with us or against us" framing of an "information war," it seemed legitimate to sacrifice truth on the altar of the anti-Kremlin cause. When developed under the exceptionally appalling conditions created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this mindset undermines the very values that those who justifiably opposed it claim to represent.

The RT article nonetheless placed us in the unusual position of entering the domain of the subject we were researching—a dilemma we had striven to avoid. There were subsequent interventions in our defense in this unanticipated micromedia event from another prestigious UK think tank, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and an affiliate of Bellingcat (the citizen journalist outfit dedicated to exposing Kremlin malfeasance). So, ironically, while this episode demonstrated the very information war paradigms we have critiqued, it also opened space within which a variety of actors reasserted liberal values, defending our right to our views, pointing to the misreadings perpetrated by our critics, and praising our commentary. Subsequently, a Twitter thread clearing up the most egregious misreadings, a tense but courteous meeting with some of our critics, and our offer to publish their response to our blog on our website produced conciliatory, constructive suggestions on the issues we addressed (Giles 2020). What, though, does this tale add to the arguments we have presented in this book? How does it illuminate the onus on us to attend to our own positions as researchers and to the now momentous issues at stake in our topic?

Plumbing the Depths of the Information War Vortex

The most salutary lesson we learned is that so deeply has the information war narrative penetrated public discourse that nobody, least of all a small group of academics, can avoid being sucked into its gigantic vortex. Any effort to temper its extremes, let alone question its foundations, is invariably propelled to one of its two poles. We experienced frustrations both when our methodological proposals to those combatting Russian disinformation were portrayed as treachery and when our research was subsumed unproblematically by a well-meaning journalist into the wider battle against the Kremlin's "extensive propaganda campaign" (Quinn 2017).

Our contretemps brings to life a second important argument we make. The fact that our blog piece, inspired by liberal democratic values, was seized upon by RT journalists who distorted its messages for their own purposes demonstrates how democracy's conflict with authoritarian states takes the form of a complex dynamic. Although it sometimes applies, the scenario of a linear battle in which mass Kremlin campaigns against Western "information spaces" are rebuffed by valiant defenders is unrepresentative. This is because it is based on an anachronistic understanding of a globally networked digital media environment in which state actors rarely enjoy either the agency or the undiluted power attributed to them.

Interventions in this network of meanings are reshaped in unpredictable patterns and according to a reciprocal process that we need to grasp. As our book's subtitle indicates, RT's pariah status is cocreated in an unwitting connivance to which the broadcaster and its adversaries are each party; far from restricting RT's room for maneuver, this reconfirms its own sense of its disruptive role, consolidating its identity and providing fuel for its mission to establish itself as the populist upstart par excellence. As chapters 8–9 showed, the virtual exclusion of RT from Western broadcasting space in 2022 did not spell the end of this process and even intensified it. The reciprocity dynamic also means that democracies have no monopoly on the meaning and usage of the familiar vocabulary of disinformation, information war, propaganda, and counterdisinformation; disinformation allegations against the West featured as heavily in Kremlin propaganda about the invasion of Ukraine as in Western accounts of it. Chapters 1 and 9 highlighted the danger of using terms designating polemical tools of practice as instruments of impartial analysis.

The lexicon of disinformation is, we have argued, contentious and inconsistent. This is why we tend to prefer the less contradictory term "state propaganda" when describing actual Kremlin malfeasance in the communications arena while maintaining a keen theoretical eye on disinformation as a discursive construct. The term "disinformation" is further problematized by an erroneous but widely believed story that the term is an English translation of the Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, coined mendaciously by Stalin to resemble a French word and thus a foreign practice that the Soviets felt obligated to respond to in kind (Tolz and Hutchings 2021).[3] The first English uses of the insult "disinformation" date to late nineteenth-century disputes between US media outlets. Moreover, it is the German, not French, influence on Russian thinking of the early Soviet period, not the Stalin era, from which the *dezinformatsiya* myth derives. These historical facts signal that disinformation discourse is inflected by a translingual othering that positions it in the arena of contested meanings, not merely that of verifiable facts and falsehoods (Tolz and Hutchings 2020). It is a short distance between RT's opportunistic use of our blog and the

broadcaster's calculated (earlier) launch of its own multilingual counterdisinformation operation, a move replicated by Chinese state broadcaster CGTN and turbocharged following Russia's military assault on Ukraine in 2022.[4]

There are two corollaries to the consequences of failing to appreciate the discursive history and persistent othering function of disinformation discourse. One is that it courts imprecision. If disinformation is the practice of the malign Other, then it makes little sense to agonize over whether that Other's narratives amount to disinformation, misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theory, malinformation, astroturfing, trolling, or propaganda (to name but a few members of the burgeoning conceptual paradigm); the point is that it is false, antagonistic, and hostile to liberal values. Yet proving intent is never easy nor is definitively attributing agency, especially in a digital world where identities are routinely camouflaged. To be fair to the counterdisinformation community, the most professional among them acknowledge these issues and often issue wisely cautious, small-print qualifications to their findings.[5]

The counterdisinformation unit we had critiqued, by contrast, underfunded and plagued with controversies from the outset (Nijeboyer 2018), has made understandable trade-offs in its operation. As RT's appropriation of our gentle interrogation of some of this unit's practices confirms, the unit is caught in a vicious mutual othering process, meaning that it can ill afford the luxury of distinguishing between disinformation, particularly outright fabrications, and factually correct partisan reporting. The nature of the relationship between the disinforming outlet in which a particular narrative appears and the outlet's sponsoring state does not seem to matter to this unit. In its database, state media outlets feature alongside those who are opposed to the Kremlin's policies, such as extreme nationalists who consider Putin too moderate. All, however, are presented as equally reflecting Russian state-sponsored disinformation. Conveniently, all these outlets are compressed under the vague umbrella notion of "pro-Kremlin ecosystem" (as though an ecosystem can be anthropomorphized as pro- or anti- any political entity).[6] The higher the "disinformation count" that the unit notches up, the more secure its funding stream in a neoliberal environment in which quantity (of clicks, likes, or disinformation narratives) is everything.

There is another corollary of the urge to simplify and generalize that results from the refusal to acknowledge disinformation's discursive function. It is an attendant lack of interest in how specific narratives play out in diverse linguacultural contexts. Two commendable attributes of the disinformation monitoring unit we had discussed in our blog are the impressive multilingual scope of its database (it covers material in over fifteen languages) and the transparency with which it reveals its workings; it provides clear links to full texts of sources labeled as disinformation.[7] It is this feature that enabled us to pinpoint mistakes in the unit's English-language summaries and disproofs of certain narratives attributed to RT's and Sputnik's Arabic and Russian-language services. The assumption that a narrative can, like a fact, be proved or disproved itself is questionable. Also significant here is the elision of disinformation with the sowing of confusion through narrative plurality, which is often now identified as the Kremlin's main communications strategy (US Department of State Global Engagement Center 2020). Again, negating the truth through lies and obscuring it with a multiplicity of unverifiable speculations are different maneuvers whose analysis requires properly contextualized hermeneutic procedures; it is therefore telling that both are subsumed within Paul and Matthews's (2016) all-embracing,

undifferentiated "firehose of falsehood" model of Russian state propaganda.

A related mistake we revealed was the listing as disinformation of an RT Arabic "conspiracy theory" in which an Iranian general is quoted asserting that COVID-19 was an American biological weapon. The spurious claim, for sure, remained unchallenged by RT Arabic. To equate the opinion of a political actor with the views of the broadcaster reporting his or her words, is questionable, however. This is especially the case, given the looser journalistic practices that prevail in mainstream Arabic-speaking media, where it is not unusual for news reporters merely to quote statements by top officials without discussing or contextualizing them (Miladi and Mellor 2021). Also significant is the fact that while for many Anglophones the "biological weapon" story is a lurid conspiratorial fantasy, for Arabic speakers sensitized to postcolonial paradigms it reinvokes colonial aggression—hence the theory's Middle Eastern currency (Hutchings and Tolz 2021). It is no accident that new variants on the bioweapons conspiracy reemerged during the Ukraine war, receiving traction not only beyond the West but within America's alt-right media ecosystem. In a more troubling case, Sputnik was accused of claiming that COVID-19 was designed "to kill elderly Italians." The source, however, targeted Latvians exposed to mainstream European media and parodied, rather than promoted, conspiracy theories. Indeed, RT's French-language output fully absorbed mainstream anticonspiracy rhetoric, redeploying it for polemical ends, as in RT's denunciation of France's leading bookseller for facilitating COVID disinformation, including the bioweapons myth (Hutchings and Tolz 2021). State-affiliated media actors deploy multiple communication strategies to engage highly diverse international audiences. Disinformation according to its tightest definition—that of the deliberate production and dissemination of factually false content—is but one among them. Moreover, what counts as propaganda and disinformation in the broader sense differs considerably from context to context.

Chapter 4 demonstrated how attention to the output of RT's different language channels could counteract the distortions and omissions that arise when uniformly applied information war narratives obscure the broadcaster's modes of assimilation to local environments. By the same token, it also pinpointed how, via the selective translation of local stories into different linguacultural idioms, RT performatively unified audiences across national environments, presenting itself as a transnational populist figurehead for all those oppressed by the European Union (EU) elite (Audinet 2021)—a narrative all too adaptable for the context of the broadcaster's expulsion from EU-regulated media space in March 2022.

We should not extrapolate too much from our encounter with one European counterdisinformation unit onto the industry more generally. Elsewhere, the need for terminological consistency is recognized (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2017; Wardle 2017). Ironically, one factor prompting this recognition was Donald Trump's weaponization of the "fake news" allegation against any media outlet that dared criticize him, rendering the term worthless to disinformation analysts. Authoritarian actors, too, have enthusiastically appropriated terms like "information war," "disinformation" and "state propaganda" within their rhetorical armories (Russian state television Channel 1 launched a daily *Anti-Fake* program designed to expose Western "disinformation" on Russia's "special military operation"). This highlights the need for critical apparatuses untainted by association with polemical practice. Then again, the problem with taxonomies, however carefully differentiated the terms, is that they become so abstracted from the practices they describe

as to prove impractical in empirical analysis.

The practical vocabulary of combatants in conflicts around disinformation still dominates the language of those seeking conceptual understanding of those conflicts. Because the vocabulary itself enters the conflict arena, authoritarian actors are, as we saw, prone to deploy disinformation accusations within their disinformation practices.[8] The ability of counterdisinformation units to adhere to values of neutral impartiality becomes compromised through reciprocal interaction with their adversaries. For those involved in the exceptional circumstances created by traditional conflicts like the war in Ukraine, "If you're against us, you're with the enemy" mantras inevitably prevail. But when the entire information sphere becomes semimilitarized through what are now everyday notions like "hybrid warfare," such attitudes slowly corrupt democracy as they are drawn into the ambit of democracy's antithesis (Zittrain 2017; Ureke 2020). As Fitzpatrick (2022) warns, the danger that "heartfelt support for democracy in Ukraine" might have "the unintended effect of eroding democratic freedoms at home" is serious. In this Alice-in-Wonderland world, the idea of counterdisinformation operatives closing rank against academics uncovering uncomfortable truths, can suddenly, and disturbingly, appear all too normal.

Mediatization, Liberal States, and the Unpredictable Power of Assemblages

In contrast with the cauldron of unruly passions stirred up by our ill-fated blog post, the sedate pace and respectful tone of any dialogue likely to be generated by our monograph seems stark. First reviews take months to materialize, and academic journals require reviewers to observe minimal standards of courtesy. The contrast reflects the fact that academia, too, has fallen under the sway of mediatization, related to the "research impact agenda" that "has been increasing steadily across a number of OECD countries, notably Australia, Canada, Netherlands and the USA" and which is now embedded within most major EU and UK research-funding schemes (Boswell and Smith 2017). It arose around the same time as social media platforms (the early 2000s). Scholars who had not hitherto been expected to justify their research to anyone other than their own communities must now demonstrate the "value for money" of their intellectual pursuits, channel their findings to vast online audiences, maximize follower numbers, and translate their work into democratic, media-legible formats like blogs.

Thus, the decision to write a blog post about counterdisinformation and announce it via Twitter was shaped partly by the mediatization of academic knowledge production and partly by the need to show that our research could be assessed according to the metrics of use value.[9] The precise link between social media democratization and the neoliberal commodification of knowledge is a topic for another monograph (with or without research impact). Neoliberalism's shadow hangs heavy over this book, however. Both RT and the counterdisinformation warriors it battles with are in different ways prisoners of its all-consuming logic—another sense in which RT's cocreation as an international pariah requires a strange, unspoken consensus across the lines of conflict.

There is poetic justice in the fact that the microassemblage that mushroomed around our blog enabled us to enact one of our central themes. Moreover, the constitution of that

assemblage, and the activities of its hastily convened membership, conformed to our earlier argument regarding mediatization's erosion of state agency. Then it was applied to RT's relationship with the Russian state, tensions and contradictions within its vast governance apparatus, and the challenges it faces in maintaining control of narratives that play out across complex global media networks. Here, however, we were witnessing a parallel fragmentation affecting British state institutions and actors. Voices representing a state-aligned think tank and pursuing a line in keeping with UK opposition to the Kremlin, supported by a rag bag of NATO-affiliated keyboard warriors, lined up against representatives of one of the great British offices of state (the Foreign and Commonwealth Office), joined by members of a UK security policy think tank.

The fact that RT journalists had inserted themselves into the assemblage further evidences the challenges involved in asserting ideological control over today's media landscape. While RT's Cold War predecessors also infiltrated Western media networks (with Kremlin-sympathetic figures sometimes inadvertently given platforms in mainstream news outlets), the complexity of digital assemblages; the degree of penetration post-Soviet Russian actors achieve within them; and the rapidity with which they emerge, disperse, and are reconfigured makes them qualitatively different from their antecedents. This strengthens our argument regarding the care that needs to be taken in combatting authoritarian state actors and the potentially counterproductive effects of applying to them old models based on linear patterns of confrontation. The incompatible bedfellows we acquired during our fifteen hours of fame point to the political flux in which we find ourselves and in which an alternative UK outlet claiming, like *Byline Times*, to sustain "the lifeblood of democracy" can share an antiestablishment mission statement with RT (its sworn illiberal enemy).[10]

It would be technologically deterministic to assert a causal relationship between the entanglement of erstwhile allies with their apparent antitheses and the assemblage phenomenon. Rather, and as with the link to the "impact" agenda, mediatization enters a structural relationship with a political realm in which, for various reasons, old ideological battle lines are giving way to more unpredictable configurations of forces. In this environment the spectacle of a principled liberal intelligentsia railing simultaneously against repressive authoritarian states and social media platforms whose interests are best served by facilitating the dissemination of disruptive conspiracy theories pushed by such states is not unusual. In other contexts, nonetheless, those same liberals fetishize the right to free expression, rejecting censorship except in the most extreme of circumstances. It is, as Harris (2021) has argued, no accident that Facebook chose British liberalism's poster boy, Nick Clegg, to front its public relations rebuttal of accusations that its business model fostered disinformation.

The contradiction at liberalism's heart is inherent to the philosophy itself, but recent political and economic shock waves have reexposed the fault lines from which populist insurgencies against Western democracies emerge. These insurgencies are affected by the same ideological flux—hence our preference for theories of populism that treat it not as a fixed set of ideas but a political logic generating floating meanings. In this light the sharing of similar "untold stories" mission statements by RT and *Byline Times* is unremarkable. Both outlets pitch themselves against an establishment elite that acts to obscure truths inconvenient to it.

Nor should we be surprised that a Western-aligned Russian media outlet with a strong

anti-Kremlin editorial line might tend to assign guilt by association rather than according to carefully considered evidence as mandated by principles of due process. The *Insider* resorted to allegation by insinuation, acknowledging with barely disguised malice that there is "not yet" evidence to suggest that we might have received secret Russian state funding (Bershidskii 2020). In a bizarre analogy, moreover, it dismissed our findings regarding the relative veracity of much of RT International's COVID-19 reporting by arguing that this is no different from pointing out that on most days, the far-right terrorist Anders Breivik did not slaughter Norwegian citizens.[11] The principles of liberal justice require that we evaluate specific acts rather than whole personalities (one reason why previous convictions cannot influence jury processes). The new populist "regime of truth" that rejects such principles does not respect traditional boundaries between liberal democrats, authoritarian propagandists, and far-right demagogues and may infect all their discourses.

We therefore concur with Maxime Audinet (2021) that portrayals of RT as a mere opportunistic chameleon that adopts the ideological coloring of the audience it targets in specific contexts do not fully account for its role in the global mediasphere. Rather, superficial contradictions in RT's positions (some aligned with the antiprogressive culture warriors of the Right; others in keeping with leftist ecosocialist and anticorporate causes) point to a performative strategy aimed at forging new currents of populist sentiment that cut across traditional ideological divides. George Monbiot (2021) noted such trends in the context of shared left-right opposition to government COVID-19 vaccination programs, referring to antivaxxer myths as "a channel for the penetration of far-right ideas into left-wing countercultures." He cites traditional left resistance to coercive state control and to the hegemony of Big Pharma, which stands to gain from mass vaccination. These are now also mainstream themes for the far Right, which, as chapter 9 showed, rapidly absorbed the anti-Ukrainian conspiracies promoted by RT (and endorsed by the far-left website the Grayzone) in the context of Russia's invasion of 2022.

Left-right crossover influences are not new (Nazism, we recall, is a contraction of "national socialism"). Recent shifts in the geopolitical tectonic plates, however, including the erosion of Western international hegemony, are fostering new hybrid forms of populist insurgency that do not fit conventional definitions. The decline of faith in impartial news reporting—a phenomenon that RT, the *Insider*, and *Byline Times* embrace with equal vigor—belongs to this picture.[12] It also, we found, united many of RT's followers for whom there is no paradox in asserting that RT's reporting seems more objective than the "pseudo-impartial" BBC; as chapters 1 and 8 argued, the "new regime of truth" is based on affect—what *feels* true—rather than on balance and neutrality (Davies 2018b).

Within the assemblage that coalesced around our blog post, it was we who fulfilled the traditional function of impartial experts directing the torch beam of objective scrutiny toward a counterdisinformation industry whose insecure funding base means that it must heed the market imperative to maximize the scale of the phenomenon it is funded to track. We competed in an arena dominated by actors targeting niche audiences attracted by populist slogans of the Left and the Right (*Byline Times* and RT are mutually antagonistic, but each appeals to distinctive constituencies within a broadly antiestablishment audience). At the same time, the vociferous rallying-round effect from which the disinformation monitor benefited (with supporters of diverse sources, grassroots and substate, joining the fray) illustrates the echo chamber phenomenon associated, sometimes misleadingly, with

online space.[13]

From Big Pharma to Big Disinfo

The clash pitting empirical researchers against inward-facing interest groups is indicative of the deep rupture within liberal democracy into which, as chapter 9 indicates, RT still strives to insert itself. We pointed to the association of the term "liberalism" with the principles of liberty, free speech, and a faith in scientific neutrality (of which striving for the academic impartiality ideal is emblematic) as well as with the distorting effects generated by unbridled neoliberalism (typified by its nurturing of the breeding grounds for conspiracy theories and disinformation). Developing Davies's (2018b) Foucault-inspired "truth regime," Harjuniemi (2022, 10) argues that "on the one hand, the liberal regime of truth has been oscillating between attempts to regulate the media market via such techniques as professional journalism and, on the other hand, free-market approaches that promote the market mechanism as the most effective way of disseminating knowledge. Such dynamics characterise the historical 'double movement' (Polanyi [1944] 2001) of liberal capitalist societies, where protection-seeking forces have coalesced to curb the destabilising excesses of market liberalism."

Harjuniemi stresses that this double movement (toward both regulation and freedom) applies equally to the democratic governance models with which capitalism is often elided. Thus, our book embrace two paradoxes: one that penetrates "the liberal order" itself and the other that "cocreates" the antiliberal, populist pariah that is RT. The Russian broadcaster's intuitive grasp of the link between these paradoxes renders it, potentially at least, a wilier, more disruptive opponent than its negligible Western ratings suggest.

In this context it is unsurprising to see even those who believe they share antiauthoritarian values adopt what look uncomfortably like Soviet persuasion methods. The easy resort to character assassination and the denial of the same right to reply that we offered our detractors (a cornerstone principle of democratic journalism) recall the Soviet practice of "tearing off the mask" (*sryvat' masku*) and arriving at the "truth" not through the careful processing of evidence but by the sudden release of what is claimed to be existing information "deceitfully concealed" by the target of the unmasking (Fitzpatrick 2005). But this widespread dethroning of the reason-based post-Enlightenment truth regime is especially ironic given that opposition to disinformation is the nodal point around which Europe's rational-liberal values coalesce: Europe stands for everything that disinformation is not, even if that "everything" is hard to pin down (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). There is, of course, no equivalence between Russian state propagandists and those tasked with exposing their deceptions. By replicating elements of the behavior of their foe, however, the counterdisinformation warriors with whom we crossed swords are unwitting participants in the reciprocal identity dynamic described in chapter 4. In this context it is logical for Europe to locate the core meaning of its selfhood (the antithesis of benightment and falsehood) at the periphery of Russia, its eastern Other (in whom such vices are deemed immanent). The EU's official disinformation monitoring unit was, as its name East StratCom confirms, established to target malign activities in Eastern European media environments—the location at which the purity of this core meaning is fought over and

won but where it is, by the same token, most vulnerable to contamination. It is the same context in which, while RT's populist machinations—and its related ability to insert itself into the reciprocal dynamic as our cocreated pariah—failed to sway Western audiences, its efforts should not be disregarded given the more impressive achievements of its Arabic- and Spanish-language operations (Schaer and Hassan 2022). A further corollary of the tendency of European powers to posit Otherness as the inversion of selfhood is that they are thereby blinded to popular sentiment in the vast geopolitical spaces beyond Europe and Eurasia—an oversight not lost on RT after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The loud tabloid pronouncements we discovered when evaluating the material responsible for the debacle engendered by our blog further confirm the mediatization effect. The accumulation of templated analyses of obscure multilingual texts with their monotonously repeating series of summaries and disproofs was no more likely to set European pulses racing than it was to secure much needed (and merited) additional EU funding and less so, still, the distribution of these texts across an unsophisticated, if admirably transparent, database. Counterdisinformation, like the phenomenon it combats, must, if it is to thrive in a world of outsourcing and deep mediatization, resort to the same methods of attracting attention as its adversaries. This is the reasoning behind Joseph Bernstein's (2021) incisive intervention in the debates around disinformation in *Harper's Magazine*. He both explains the antipathy garnered by our naive act of critical friendship and captures the environment responsible for it, and for much of what we have argued. He notes the lack of clear definitions hampering disinformation analysis and the confusion created by the proliferation of affiliated terms. Citing the failure to distinguish "disinformation, misinformation, online propaganda, hyperpartisan news, fake news, clickbait, rumors, and conspiracy theories," he argues that "in their crudest use, the terms are simply jargon for 'things I disagree with.' " He demonstrates how the parsimonious approaches to knowledge favored within the academy do not suit antidisinformation warriors, in whose interests it is to inflate the impression of a formless slick of toxicity slowly poisoning our values: "A quick scan of the institutions that publish most … influentially about disinformation: Harvard University, the *New York Times*, Stanford University, MIT, NBC, the Atlantic Council, the Council on Foreign Relations, etc. That the most prestigious liberal institutions of the pre-digital age are the most invested in fighting disinformation reveals a lot about what they have got to lose, and what they hope to gain." His critique inventories the components of this formidable alliance: "The disinformation project is … an unofficial partnership.… Social scientists get funding for research projects that might show up in the news. Think tanks want to study quantifiable policy problems. Journalists strive to expose powerful hypocrites and create 'impact.' "

Seen in this light, affinities between disinformation purveyors and their opponents, or between a Kremlin-funded populist broadcaster and an alternative outlet keen to expose Russia's covert connections with the British establishment, make sense (the latter connection also, of course, reflects RT's willingness to learn from Western alt-media of all political shades as part of its precarious tripartite identity balancing act). Bernstein's account of these affinities provides a gloss, too, on the contradiction implied by our book's subtitle: the notion of RT's willing compliance with its pariah status.

Participatory Audiences and the Return of an Old Dilemma

The shared propensity for outlandish headlines reminds us that the microassemblage to which RT and its counterdisinformation foe contributed was a hybrid of outlets and audiences. In assemblages, statuses are fluid and reversible. We, too, enjoyed the dubious privilege of constituting the audience of an RT output in which we featured as the main subject. RT journalists, meanwhile, became audiences to a *Byline Times* article for which their own outlet was the central theme. Both actors were simultaneously participatory audiences actively (and aggressively) responding to our own output (a blog post). This boundary blurring is part of the wider media landscape shaping the behavior of RT, whose ability to move seamlessly (and digitally) from the role of broadcaster to that of participatory audience accords it populist potency. This performative practice is more important to our argument than RT's ideological positions, populist or otherwise, on specific issues. It was epitomized in the special projects discussed in chapters 6–7 (the centenary of the 1917 revolution; the 2018 World Cup). Especially in 1917Live, RT displayed ingenuity in creating a cast of fictionalized historical characters, each anachronistically given a Twitter account that enabled them to generate content, respond to it, and engage with followers.

The fact that 1917Live centered on a workers' uprising against an embattled elite—allowing RT followers to reimagine themselves as anti-elite protestors—fueled the political engine that was the project's populist premise. Followers of 1917Live, and of the 2018 World Cup project, did not match the stereotypical picture of RT audiences, just as the projects themselves deviated from RT's notorious state propaganda fare, resembling instead traditional soft power initiatives. By aligning its nonthreatening soft power narratives (about the global significance, positive and negative, of the Bolshevik Revolution and about Russia's hospitality as host of a major sports competition) with history enthusiasts and football fans, respectively, RT temporarily escaped the straitjacket imposed on it by its adversaries, bolstering its populist appeal.

Russia's war on Ukraine appeared to resecure RT into that straitjacket, ending any fading soft power aspirations it might have harbored for Western audiences. Maintaining a rigid distinction between "soft power" (a legitimate activity associated with well-meaning democratic states) and "state propaganda" (illegitimate authoritarian malfeasance) is unhelpful, however (the principles of provocative rule-breaking underlying 1917Live are those of much of RT's overtly political output, including that of the Ukraine war period). More rational is the earlier referenced case made by Szostek 2020 for a limited expansion of the definition of "public diplomacy" to cover areas where authoritarian and democratic projection practices overlap combined with a clear recognition of where they diverge—for example, in the context of justifying illegal imperialist aggression and using deliberately fabricated content.

Our audience analysis demonstrated that while the two soft power projects, outliers in RT's broader output, produced follower profiles different from those of the channel's conventional propaganda material, more typical global RT followers also defied the image commonly attributed to them. Instead of marginalized, countercultural echo chambers, we found a mix of followers, many of whom operate in complex networks that integrate them with mainstream outlets and cultural tastes. These networks are far from stable, and RT's

followers proved both eclectic (dipping in and out of its coverage, along with that of the BBC and CNN) and fickle (as chapter 5 indicated, RT followers demonstrate little fidelity). This reflects the larger picture of the ideologically and culturally fragmented post–Cold War world in which we situated our analysis, where political loyalties and identities are fluid and where impartiality principles are being eroded from multiple points in the political spectrum as truth and objectivity become equated with what *feels* true and objective. This represents an opportunity and a challenge for all states, but especially authoritarian ones. We also found that rather than behaving as passive dupes of state propaganda and deception, RT followers tended to be aware of the broadcaster's political distortions, claiming to possess critical media literacy skills enabling them to identify bias across all media, to "deconstruct" the much-vaunted impartiality of respectable mainstream outlets like the BBC, or, alternatively, to recenter it closer to the political margins and to treat RT as but one among many tainted news sources from which they are obliged to "piece together" the truth. Their sensibilities partly resemble what Ma (2023) calls the "bootstrap epistemology" deployed by Anglophone far-right media consumers who, as her research demonstrates, are "*more* likely than liberals to visit diverse sources of news" and who see themselves as "rejecting dogma and instead pursu[ing] knowledge through solitary study and intellectual combat with opponents." Such findings, like ours, underscore the urgent need to rethink mirrorlike "twisted lies/twisted judgment" models of disinformation production and consumption.

Our analysis of audience configurations confirms that their participation in assemblages is context-specific and ephemeral. Here, too, our own microassemblage proved emblematic; the mutual encounter of actors as disparate as university academics, RT journalists, alternative and citizen journalists, UK think tanks and policy makers, and an EU-funded disinformation tracker dissipated as suddenly as it had formed. Models of media control lose force in this environment, even as the Putin regime ramps up its post-2022 efforts to assert it (whether by banning multiple news providers, branding virtually all oppositional media outlets as "foreign agents," imprisoning journalists, manipulating algorithms to minimize audience access to inconvenient content, striving to replicate China's internet firewall, or flooding media space with pro-state news; see, e.g., Fedor and Fredheim 2017. The desperation such measures betray reflects the panic that drives them. Assumptions that the Kremlin can forever subordinate the uncertain meanings of a "posttruth world" to its whims, notwithstanding mediatization's inexorable advance, appear fanciful. For the same reason, so, too, do efforts to eviscerate those whims merely by exposing big tech algorithms, sanctioning Kremlin operatives, or improving media literacy. As we argued, it is no coincidence that Russia and the West are equally prolific in their use of the term "information war" to describe what is a single self-reinforcing model serving the interests, and neatly packaging the concerns, of both parties.

Our own presence in the media event described in our closing anecdote was similarly convenient to us in furnishing the pretext for a conclusion. Despite being neither planned nor desired, it strengthened our findings. It confirmed that adherents of linear information war models used to account for the challenge that contemporary Russia poses to democracy fail to observe the principles in whose name they are deployed (claims that the Kremlin relentlessly assaults liberal values held dear by democrats become problematic when those same democrats spurn the liberal commitment to the principles of dispassionate analysis). It also revealed that such models lack the self-reflexivity that is a

corollary of liberal impartiality—the readiness to interrogate constantly one's own methods and assumptions. The BBC is unjustly mocked for its tortured internal debates on the elusive meaning of the "due impartiality" it inculcates in its journalists (Wahl-Jorgensen, Berry, and Garcia-Blanco 2016; Lewis and Cushion 2019). But self-reflexivity also implies a willingness to concede that objects can themselves be reshaped by the act of analyzing them. Here, the BBC's practice is less exemplary, as illustrated by the fuel it unwittingly gave to climate change skeptics by representing the issue in terms of two equally valid but opposing perspectives (Parratt 2014).

The counterintuitive quantum principle that reality is affected by the act of observing it offers a metaphor for the cocreation phenomenon. To put things simply, the hostile intentions and malign actions identified by theorists of the "information war" (as chapter 1 clarified, the term's Russian lineage is barely any shorter than that of its Western counterpart, predating Putin) gain momentum from being described as such. Our final cautionary tale, however, reveals that the apparent simplicity is misleading. For the activities of information warriors and the course of the conflict are altered by the act of questioning that same excessive simplicity. In publishing an evidence-driven critique of a counterdisinformation unit, we did not seek coverage on RT's website any more than we welcomed the assault coordinated by its committed opponents. Mutually hostile information war protagonists are liable to collude when the notion that drives the logic of their self-serving, self-replicating identities is challenged. Our intervention merely added new twists to the complex spiral that it forms.

This is no self-parodic illustration of the mythical postmodernist precept that language determines reality (few serious postmodernism theorists reduce their views to such platitudes). We are not suggesting that if only we abandon the concept of the "information war," the reality of Russia's paranoid, anti-Western posturing would magically evaporate, along with its appalling military consequences. It does, however, point to a reciprocity between the conceptual apparatus with which we describe that reality and its course of development—an adage whose truth has, paradoxically, been demonstrated most vividly when it has been occluded (nobody in the West set out to indulge RT's aspirations to pariah status).

Far from corroborating spurious accounts of postmodernist subjectivism, the unpredictable reshaping of reality by its description is a realist stance. It is assumptions that the reality of Russia's truculence always and entirely conforms to the above-mentioned reductive "firehose of falsehood" trope that amount to purified abstractions. The complexity engendered by the unpredictable reciprocity of observer and observed, by contrast, serves to underscore reality's messy, contingent materiality.

Our account has returned full circle to what we termed in our introduction "the messy contingencies that beset autocratic and democratic states alike." We now, however, see more clearly the dangers of being forced into binary choices between all-explicating semiosis (the idea that Russia's actions correspond neatly and comprehensively to an a priori model capable of extracting predictable meaning from them) and the swirling, chaotic maelstrom of meaningless contingency (the equally doubtful thesis that Russia's behavior depends entirely on the circumstances in which it unfolds). Instead of universal, orderly meaning competing with disorderly, mutable context, it is the latter that concretizes and authenticates the former.

Contingency, Recursion, and the Restoration of Liberal Order

Our brief coda highlights how, in the case of coconstruction, contingency takes the form of recursion: the repeated application of a single function to an initial set of elements in a succession capable of indefinite extension. But according to Yuk Hui (2019, 10–11), "Recursivity is not mere mechanical repetition; it is characterised by the looping movement of returning to itself in order to determine itself, while every movement is open to contingency, which in turn determines its singularity." Hui (2019, 435, 470) associates the messy complexity of the recursive interplay between selfhood and Otherness as that of life itself: "Life also exhibits such complexity, since it … attempts to turn the unexpected into an event that can contribute to its singularity … *contingency acquires meaning* in these operations."

Something is contingent in relation to something else that, to the contrary, is organized as a system and only becomes so *when, through recursion, it is incorporated into that system as such*. In other words, irreducible Otherness is as illusory as solipsistic, pure subjectivity. Eventness, however disruptive, merely expresses recursion's looping act of integrating contingency into selfhood. For example, the attack on New York's Twin Towers transcended its status as random destruction to become an "event"—a dramatic happening with significance—when it entered the US national narrative as "9/11."[14]

The language with which the conflict with Russia is conveyed in Western public discourse (that of "information war") has likewise become inscribed within the logic of conflict itself. Conversely, and as chapter 4 contended, Russia provocatively embraces the West's negative view of it as a weapon with which to advance the conflict, just as the West incorporates this brazen act into its insistence on Russia's pariah status.

The lexicon of recursion exposes the illusion that treating RT (or Russia) as irredeemably, despicably, and absolutely Other—an illusion bolstered by the utter contempt for legal and humanitarian norms displayed in Russia's assault on Ukraine—will ultimately enable us to shore up a discrete democratic identity and protect us from accommodating the Other's criminal depredations. Chapter 9 revealed, paradoxically, that such contamination arises precisely from overrigid, Manichean models pitting us against the bounded space of an irrevocably dehumanized alterity. Like all identity projects, that of the liberal order is not sealed off from what is Other to it, nor is it impenetrable and self-contained. It is open, porous, and incomplete, constantly gesturing in looping fashion to integrate the contingent Otherness of that which appears to negate it (but may merely echo it) within a constant process of self-renewal. Like recursion, the process is not one of hermetic autoreference but of reality concretizing itself in response to contingency. Relatedly, the introjection of our authorial team into one of the assemblages we set out to describe from without was no random anomaly but an essential part of the recursion process by which mediatization evolves, incorporating externality within its workings and ensuring that selfhood is constantly renewed by its engagement with Otherness.

The logic of recursion is not that of a postmodern self-referentiality born of idealistic flight from the real, contingent world but the *corrective* to that false dichotomy. It is only through recursion that life incorporates the contingent and unexpected to become concrete and real. There follow both normative and descriptive implications for our account. Our emphasis on RT's status as a cocreated international pariah neither diminishes the gravity

of the broadcaster's provocative assault on mainstream liberal values nor blames Western powers for inflating the challenge it presents. Rather, it reflects the reality that interstate relations, like all dialogic encounters, form a dynamic in which each party is inflected by the other and develops in response to it. That is true for both "doves" or "hawks" regarding Russia's assault on international norms. The generation of meaning from such encounters—even negative meaning—ameliorates the antagonist's abstract Otherness, incorporating and reprocessing its overwhelming contingency. The cocreation of RT as a pariah is one illustration of a more general truth.

We have dubbed RT a *populist* pariah. By emphasizing RT's affiliations to global populism, we showed that the intensity of democratic antagonism toward it is a function of its uncanny ability to replicate in distorted form the flaws and contradictions afflicting democracy. These include the shocks of Brexit, Trump, COVID-19, and the associated "infodemic" toxifying the liberal order from within and without.[15] In what is itself a recursive double movement, populist manipulations of the misinformation seeping from between that order's creaking foundation stones are appropriated by external actors like RT, whose insertion into the crevices merely expands them. Forcibly extirpating RT from those crevices, as happened in February–March 2022, not only failed to prevent its tendrils from reencroaching into the homegrown spaces of alt-right (and alt-left) populism. It also generated new outgrowths into the vast conspiratorial, antihegemonic ecosystems of the geopolitical anti-Western nonself (witness, for example, RT's rapid and ambitious postinvasion expansion into African media space).

At its most fundamental, what we are describing requires an acknowledgment of the presence of the self within the Other, the noncoincidence of real and imagined selves, and the breach dividing those who are Other from the self's images of them. It foregrounds the dangers inherent in the act of absolute othering (even when that act is legitimated through the restriction of the antagonism to regimes and states rather than people and even, or rather, especially, in the context of unconscionable outrages like the invasion of Ukraine), of not recognizing the contingent alterity, the engagement with which defines humans as meaning-making beings. It risks predetermining a future that must remain forever undecided. As Bakhtin (1984, 166) puts it: "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world. The ultimate word of the world, and about the world, has yet to be spoken. The world is open and free. Everything is, and will always be, in the future." Nothing, we might add, is more categorically imperative (in the full Kantian sense) to the maintenance of a liberal order.

Appendix: Analysis of RT Twitter Activity

RT Tweets Compared across Time Periods

May 28, 2018 (the day before the election)	
RT_Com: 2,118 tweets	
RTUKnews: 40 tweets	
May 28, 2019 (two years)	
RT_Com: 2,619 tweets	
RTUKnews: 23 tweets	
July 28, 2015 (three months before the election)	
RT_Com: 2,045 tweets	
RTUKnews: 36 tweets	

TABLE A.1. Tweets by RT (RT_Com and RTUKnews)

May 28, 2018 (the day before the election)	
Replies to RT_Com: 1,121	
Replies to RTUKnews: 128	
May 28, 2019 (two years)	
Replies to RT_Com: 1,382	
Replies to RTUKnews: 233	
July 28, 2015 (three months before the election)	
Replies to RT_Com: 2,318	
Replies to RTUKnews: 343	

TABLE A.2. Replies to/mentions of RT (RT_Com and RTUKnews)

NUMBER OF TWEETS TO RT'S TWEETS	
RT_Com	
May 2, 2019 (inaccurate)	
May 23, 2019	
May 24, 2019	
May 25, 2019	

May 26, 2019
ActualidadRT
May 22, 2019
May 23, 2019
May 24, 2019
May 25, 2019
May 26, 2019
RTenfrancais
May 22, 2019
May 23, 2019
May 24, 2019
May 25, 2019
May 26, 2019
RT_Deutsch
May 22, 2019
May 23, 2019
May 24, 2019
May 25, 2019
May 26, 2019
RTarabic
May 22, 2019
May 23, 2019
May 24, 2019
May 25, 2019
May 26, 2019
RT_russian
May 22, 2019
May 23, 2019
May 24, 2019
May 25, 2019
May 26, 2019

TABLE A.3. Tweets and responses to RT language services, May 22–26, 2019

RT_COM (ENGLISH)	
Hashtag	
Tweet	
Tweet	
Tweet

Blanc
Bruxelles
Catalogne
Cote d'Ivoire
Dialogue
Elysee
Europe
Gaza
Gilets Jaunes
Hezbollah
Iran
Israel
Jerusalem
Kosovo
Macron
Merkel
Nice
Palestinians
Pays Bas
Russie
SpaceX
Syrie
Washington
Yemen
explosion
Allemagne
#REM

TABLE A.4. Most common RT Twitter hashtags, May 22–26, 2019 (EU-related hashtags highlighted)

RT_COM (ENGLISH)	ACTIVATED USERS
Hashtag	
#Bruxelles2019	
#Macron	
#Merkel	
#Nice	
#Syrie	
#Yemen	
#Bruxelles2019	
#Catalogne	
#Gaza	
#Iran	
#Israel	
#Jerusalem	
#Kosovo	
#Russie	
#Blanc	
#Dialogue	
#Elysee	
#Europe	
#GiletsJaunes	
#Hezbollah	
#Palestinians	
#SpaceX	
#Washington	
#Allemagne	
#REM	
#Bruxelles2019	
#Europeennes2019	
#Europeennes2019	
#EuropeElections2019	
#Europeennes2019	
#Thunberg	
#Huawei	
#Sweden	
#Meinungsfreiheit	
#FreeAssange	
#Assange	
#Julian	
#Assange	
#Assange	
#Macron	
#HandsOffVenezuela	
#MAGA	
#CinturónDeFuegoDelPacifico	

Sana'a
Arabic
Assi_balani
Broadcasts mbc_ sedition
Jordan
Statements
Risha_sho
Doha
Leader of Twitter_Romio_18 Ramadan
Earthquake
Expand your vision
#IndonesiaMenang
Temperatures

TABLE A.6. Hashtags used in mentions/responses to RT

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. A respected Russia analyst, Mark Galeotti, tweeted in 2015 that he was anticipating accusations of being a "Russia apologist" for criticizing Western approaches to Putin's actions in Syria. Twitter, October 20, 2015, https://twitter.com/markgaleotti/status/656540526691401728.

2. China's leading media tool of international projection, CGTN, signed a collaboration agreement with RT, its Russian equivalent. See CGTN, "China Media Group Signs Cooperation Agreement with Russian News Agency," September 13, 2018, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d774e7851544d7a457a6333566d54/share_p.html.

3. The subtlety applied less to RT German and to RT Russian, whose mirroring of the anti-Ukrainian stance of domestic Russian state media during the war period accounts for the horrific license Anton Krasovsky granted himself to advocate the killing of Ukrainian children (see chapter 2).

4. This etymology is false; the first uses of "disinformation" date to internal political disputes in the nineteenth-century American press (Hutchings and Tolz 2021).

5. The BBC WS now receives its funding from the UK license fee, topped by a grant from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. RT is funded directly by the Russian government.

1. MEDIA COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

1. Following current social scientific trends, we divide political systems into democracies and dictatorships. The latter term is used to describe political systems in which leaders are chosen by means other than democratic elections. Mostly researched in relation to democratic societies, mediatization has begun to be acknowledged in the analysis of authoritarian systems (Block 2013; Bulut and Yörük 2017; Wang 2020).

2. Margarita Simonyan, tweet praising Lukashenko's actions, Twitter, May 23, 2021, https://twitter.com/M_Simonyan/status/1396461624337354753?s=20; Simonyan, tweet criticizing Lukashenko's actions, Twitter, May 25, 2021, https://twitter.com/m_simonyan/status/1397244259552595979?s=11; tweets criticizing Simonyan's "shape-shifting," Twitter, accessed

November 8, 2022, https://twitter.com/marina_olef/status/1397291915264110592; https://twitter.com/55Serg19/status/1397407005879513095; https://twitter.com/people_owls/status/1397633961745129474.

3. Boyko particularly toed the Kremlin's line in her appearances on RT Russian (e.g., RT Russian, "Prekrasnaya Rossiya bu-bu-bu," March 24, 2022). In the first months of the war, Boyko's *World Apart* program on RT International, in contrast, continued to maintain an element of "staged pluralism."

4. Idov and MacDonald criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The UK government sanctioned MacDonald for his work for RT; see Ronan McGreevy, "Irish Man Sanctioned by British Government for Russian Media Links," *Irish Times*, May 4, 2022, https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/irish-man-sanctioned-by-british-government-for-russian-media-links-1.4869637. See also Michael Idov, " 'Language Is Never the Enemy': Why I Will No Longer Write in Russian as Long as Putin is in Power," *Vanity Fair*, February 28, 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/02/why-i-will-not-write-in-russian-as-long-as-putin-is-in-power.

5. In their prewar comparative study of authoritarian information manipulation, Carter and Carter (2018, 15) concluded that state-affiliated news providers within countries like Russia exhibited levels of bias similar to those of Fox News.

6. A good example is the outcry in the United States in 2005 provoked by the *New York Times*' investigation of the US government's "perception management" activities, including providing preprepared reports to independent media outlets and presenting government policies in a favorable light.

7. There exists an international market for buying bot-generated social media followers. No one claims that Russia pioneered this market. "Follower fishing" is a technique of poaching the followers of others by following them temporarily. "Narrative switching" refers to the practice in which a social media account starts by posting banal content and subsequently switches to political issues.

8. On how long-lasting, "hard" state propaganda can undermine the legitimacy of an authoritarian regime, see Huang 2018.

9. These figures do not tally with the levels of trust in state television registered in polls.

10. On June 6, 2022, Russia's human rights organization Roskomsvoboda reported fifty-three criminal cases out of two thousand police investigations overall.

2. WHAT IS RT?

1. Unavailable via its original published source due to postwar restrictions, the video is accessible in archived form via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20220316194508/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7K7SaEgB7w.

2. Sputnik's provocative stances range from its more aggressively partisan news coverage to the greater frequency of factual distortions in that coverage.

3. See LinkedIn, https://www.linkedin.com/company/rt.

4. See "RT: Distribution," RT, January 23, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220123033755/https://www.rt.com/about-us/distribution/ for an archive version of the relevant page.

5. There was unproven speculation at the time that Martin's protest, her reprimand from Simonyan, her own riposte to that reprimand, and her belated resignation were deliberately staged, though this version of events was hotly contested. (Kirchik 2014).

6. The information about RT's organizational structure and newsroom operations was provided by a senior ex-RT presenter but is corroborated elsewhere, including Alpert 2014.

7. These differ from RT's separate "Fake Check" service, aimed at exposing "fake news" and false information disseminated by Western media outlets.

8. For the mission statements, see "About the BBC", https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission; "VOA: Mission and Values," https://www.insidevoa.com/p/5831.html; "RFE/RL: Our Mission, Journalism and Independence," https://pressroom.rferl.org/about-us; "DW: Our Mission, Strategy and Goals", https://www.dw.com/en/our-mission-strategy-and-goals/a-18230211; "France 24: Who Are We?," https://www.france24.com/en/about-us (all accessed January 23, 2024).

9. See Al Jazeera, "Who We Are," https://network.aljazeera.net/about-us/our-values, accessed January 23, 2024.

10. For these three broadcasters' mission statements, see RT, "About Us," January 31, 2022, https://www.rt.com/about-us/; CGTN, "Contact Us," https://www.cgtn.com/opinions/Contact-Us.html, accessed January 23, 2024; Press TV, "About Press TV," https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2014/12/31/390988/About-PressTV, accessed January 23, 2024.

11. "Fake Check," https://fakecheck.rt.com/, accessed February 5, 2024.

12. Reflecting a common trend of punishing only critics of Russia's war on Ukraine, in December 2022, Russia's Investigation Committee found no critical offense in Krasovsky's call for murdering Ukrainian children (RFE/RL 2022).

13. Here, and throughout, dates are given in the form month, day, year.

4. RT'S EUROPEAN UNION 2019 ELECTION COVERAGE

1. Ramsay and Robertshaw (2018) show that much RT and Sputnik output is critical of the West but is largely ignored in the United Kingdom.

5. MEDIATIZATION AND THE SALISBURY POISONINGS

1. Developing the concept of "rewired propaganda," Oates (2016, 2021) similarly argues that nonfree states have asymmetrical advantage in disseminating preferred narratives in the digital age.

2. Channel 1's *Vremya* and other talk shows were accessed via the channel's archive at https://www.1tv.ru/; RT daily news broadcasts were recorded by our team; RT current affairs programs were at the time of writing archived at YouTube, www.youtube.com/rt. BBC *News at 10* (domestic audiences) and BBC *Beyond 100 Days* (news breakdown aimed at US audiences) were accessed via https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand. Programs are cited in the text by name and date aired.

3. Whereas Channel 1's *Vremya pokazhet* covered the Salisbury poisonings virtually every day from March 7 to September 12, 2018, strikingly, on September 13 it pointedly did not. After Simonyan's interview no further news items or talk shows dedicated to the Salisbury poisonings aired on the channel, including on September 27, when further revelations about the identities of the suspects came out.

6. MAPPING RT'S GLOBAL ONLINE AUDIENCES

1. Interview conducted on May 28, 2020.

2. The show was discontinued in 2022 in view of the termination of RT UK and Keiser's resignation from RT.

3. Ukraine restricted access to a range of Russian state media outlets, including RT, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Lithuania implemented a similar ban in 2020.

4. The expression "provincializing Europe" was coined by Chakrabarty (2009) in his powerful critique of the European/Western centricity of Anglophone scholarship.

7. TALKING TO RT AUDIENCES

1. A Google search conducted on November 11, 2022, using the terms "RT" and "disinformation" produced over a million results.

2. Antiwokeness is not exclusive to the right. Some progressive left opinion rejects the woke movement as an indulgent distraction from authentic class politics. This is epitomized by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who, prior to the war in Ukraine (which he strongly opposed), used his RT op-eds to promote his own brand of antiwokeness. See Žižek 2021a and 2021b supporting RT's efforts to bridge the right-left divide by forging a transnational, transideological populist alliance.

3. Aligning with Wagnsson (2022) is Zakharova (2022), whose study of online comments on RT France's YouTube videos paints a predominantly right-wing profile for RT France audiences, though

her findings have limited value given the disproportionately extreme inclinations of online commenters.

8. DISINFORMATION, IDENTITY DISCOURSES, AND WAR

1. RT France's approach was similar to that of RT International.

2. In the first two months of the war, sport, rather than war, provided the top headlines on the RT International news app. RT German and RT Spanish downplayed war-related news events (*Economist* 2022).

3. The title is a play on words mocking the quality of the output of one of the main propagandists, Vladimir Soloviev.

4. We define a "floating signifier" as "a signifier that absorbs rather than emits meaning" (Buchanan 2010).

5. Multiple examples of such maps can be identified through a search for "maps of Ukraine" (*karty Ukrainy*) on Russia's main search engine, Yandex.ru, which has been complying with government demands to exclude anti-Kremlin sources from its search results.

6. In 2014 the main Russian government newspaper published an exposé of Solzhenitsyn's evolving views on "the Ukrainian question." See "Solzhenitsyn: Ukrainskii vopros—iz opasneishikh voprosov nashego budushchego," *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, April 23, 2014, https://rg.ru/2014/04/24/solzhenicyn.html.

7. See "Seriya knig proekt Anti-Rossiya," https://eksmo.ru/series/proekt-antirossiya-ID3938/, accessed January 28, 2024.

8. The profile of posts on *Solovinyi pomet* on April 4, 2022, when the Bucha atrocities dominated media coverage, is typical. Only two of the fourteen posts on that day addressed Russia's denials of culpability through fact-checking; twelve posts engaged in the deconstruction of Kremlin narratives and their framing discourses through the use of sarcasm, repurposing the civilizational discourse of the West and inverting the meaning of the floating signifier "fascism/Nazism."

9. Igor Yakovenko is an oppositional journalist with his own YouTube channel, as is Yevgeniya Albats. Maksim Shevchenko, formerly a Russian state television journalist, has been criticizing Putin's policies since 2016. Yakovenko and Shevchenko appear to be of Ukrainian descent. Yuri Pivovarov is a well-known Russian historian.

10. When conducting our analysis, we were surprised by how limited the use of the Russian world concept was in the state media coverage of the war, compared to the prewar period.

11. "RT: 'vse deti dlya nas ravny, esli oni rodilis s beloi kozhei." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_LiEn6NPuI, accessed January 28, 2024.

12. In this elaborate metaphor, the cockroaches are Russians and Ukrainians (both referred to in the program as "Russians"), whereas the actor feeding the cockroaches is the West/NATO.

13. A 1939 German naval rearmament plan was code-named *Z*, and destroyers bearing this insignia were produced as part of it. Russian military propagandists who decided to use this symbol in the context of the Ukraine war were clearly unaware of the historical parallel.

14. RT International included stories to this effect on its news app almost daily. Such stories were also regularly discussed on domestic television shows.

9. WAR ON THE LIBERAL (B)ORDER

1. On June 17, 2022, Putin reaffirmed to TASS his belief that Russia's actions in Ukraine had terminated the unipolar world order. See "Unipolar World Gone Forever, Putin Says," TASS, June 17, https://tass.com/politics/1467581?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com.

2. For the text of Ofcom's decision to revoke RT's license, see "Notice of a Decision Under 3(3) of the Broadcasting Act 1990 and Section 3(3) of the Broadcasting Act 1996 in Respect of Licences TLCS 000881, TLCS 001686 and DTPS 000072 Held by ANO TV-Novosti," Ofcom, March 18, 2022,

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/234023/revocation-notice-ano-tv-novosti.pdf.

3. According to this report, in Ukraine "corruption remains endemic.… Attacks against journalists, civil society activists, and … minority groups are frequent, and police responses are often inadequate." See "Freedom in the World: Ukraine," https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/freedom-world/2021, accessed 31 January 2023.

4. Arutunyan 2022 provides an attenuated version of the same argument.

5. See Sarah Rainsford, Twitter, April 5, 2022, https://twitter.com/sarahrainsford/status/1511279986052931586?s=11&t=kRD5YRGZIz17IS7w-gaghA.

6. See Paul Mason News, Twitter, March 15, 2022, https://twitter.com/paulmasonnews/status/1503807133644570632?s=11 and https://twitter.com/paulmasonnews/status/1503807963814846468?s=11.

7. A debate followed around whether the contrast represents Western media hypocrisy or if expressions of sympathy for our Ukrainian cousins might generate a more liberal consensus on migration. As Gary Younge (2022) argues, "The public desire to welcome Ukrainian refugees … offers the opportunity to recalibrate what meeting our global responsibilities to humanity might look like, if only we could expand our understanding of who qualifies as human." Liberalism is, and must remain, an unfinished project.

8. The institute and the position of some of its members, including Viatrovych, provoked criticism at the time among both Western commentators and Ukrainian professional historians for their crude ethnonationalism and the whitewashing Cohen mentions.

9. See also Twitter, February 25, 2022, https://twitter.com/markscott82/status/1497128743369949186.

10. See, for example, Paul Mason News, Twitter, March 15, 2022, https://twitter.com/paulmasonnews/status/1503807963814846468?s=11.

11. Available at "The List: Is it Propaganda or Not," November 30, 2016, http://www.propornot.com/p/the-list.html.

CONCLUSION

1. We are, with few exceptions, preserving the anonymity of the individuals involved despite the free public availability of their pronouncements. The identities of our most aggressive assailants are concealed under the fictionalized Twitter handles that are the hallmark of online trolling everywhere.

2. In addition to Boyle 2020, see Tolz's October 2018 BBC *Newsnight* appearance, BBC, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bnb3jf#, and quotes by Hutchings in Waterson 2018 and Chatterje-Doody 2022.

3. For academic research that repeats this myth, see Hanley and Munoriyarwa 2021; Freelon and Wells 2020.

4. For RT's FakeCheck operation, see https://fakecheck.rt.com/; for CGTN's equivalent, see its web-site "Facts Tell," https://www.cgtn.com/specials/Facts-Tell.html, accessed January 29, 2024.

5. Studies unmasking Beijing's or Moscow's hand in disinformation "campaigns" regularly deploy small-print disclaimers like "cannot attribute to a particular actor with high … confidence" or "can with a medium degree of confidence" (Digital Forensic Research Lab 2019; Graphika 2021).

6. See the contorted explanation of the term "pro-Kremlin ecosystem" at "Change of Terminology in the EUvsDisinfo Database," https://euvsdisinfo.eu/change-of-terminology-in-the-euvsdisinfo-database/, accessed January 29, 2024.

7. See "Database", https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/, accessed January 29, 2024.

8. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, RT endorsed Moscow's claims that the United States was practicing disinformation about Russia's intensions towards Ukraine. See "Ukraine Invasion Claims 'US Disinformation'—Moscow," RT International, November 22, 2021, https://www.rt.com/russia/540986-ukraine-invasion-reports-disinformation/.

9. Higher education's distortions by neoliberal governance models are much bemoaned (Maisuria

and Cole 2017). The related link to mediatization is less frequently scrutinized.

10. See *Byline Times*, "About" front page, https://bylinetimes.com/about/, accessed January 29, 2024.

11. The blog that attracted the *Insider*'s bizarre attack explained that our findings only related to RT International's online news reports. In this book and elsewhere, we have noted how, in its other output (RT Arabic, German, and Russian news reports; RT's Facebook pages), dubious COVID-19 claims were aired uncritically.

12. *Byline Times* acknowledges that although not politically partisan, it is "not neutral and stands against corruption, injustice and the erosion of truth and the rule of law." See https://bylinetimes.com/about/.

13. The literature on echo chambers and filter bubbles, considered the dominant feature of our fragmented public sphere, has been critiqued by Guess et al. (2018), who note that these phenomena are less prevalent than assumed and that most online audiences are exposed to multiple viewpoints. The audience of our commentary on counterdisinformation exhibits signs of both the echo chamber effect and its dissolution.

14. For more on recursion and its links to eventness and nationhood, see Hutchings 2022.

15. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines "infodemics" as an "overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that occurs during an epidemic," leading to "mistrust in governments and public health response." See WHO, "Infodemic Management," https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management, accessed January 29, 2024.

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